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THE GOPHER DETECTIVE

OR,

Mark Magic on a New Trail.

BY ANTHONY P. MORRIS,
AUTHOR OF "ELECTRO PETE," "THE
MASKED MYSTERY," "HANK HOUND,"
"THE MAN SPIDER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A DETECTIVE UNLEASHED.

A WOMAN'S shrill shriek, a piercing cry.
The one startling word of the cry:
"Murder!"

Probably one of the most quiet and at the same time respectable localities in the Monumental City, after dark, is that of St. Paul street north of Lexington.

The lawyers' offices on every side are all closed and silent; the few residences that commence, almost with a timidly intrusive aspect here, intermixed with the rows and rows of offices, seem to partake of the general somberness of the neighborhood, rearing grimly—old landmarks, as it



"FAR ENOUGH!" SAID A STERN VOICE, AS A HAND THAT WAS POWERFUL GRIPED THE BURGLAR BY SHOULDER AND THROAT RESPECTIVELY.

were—and presenting a retired appearance to the passer-by.

Yet from this vicinity, on a certain night, had rung forth upon the sultry July air, the alarm of some one in terrible danger or distress, menaced by death, as the cry indicated.

Few were there to hear, few walked through the deserted environ, with the busier thoroughfares so close at hand.

But the vigilant patrolman on his beat heard and promptly started on a brisk run for the spot.

At least toward where he supposed the spot of the occurrence to be; for at the hour, ten in the evening, there were scarcely any lights showing from the fronts of the tall dwellings, and though the cry had evidently issued from some upper window, it was difficult to locate it exactly.

A lonely pedestrian at the further corner also heard; he came running forward as the policeman paused, perplexed, on a pavement before a handsome residence of old style build.

"What's the matter, officer?"

"I don't know. But I certainly heard some one cry out murder!"

"And so did I. Was it about here?"

"You're too much for me. I have heard the cry before."

"You have?"

"Yes. The same as that one. A single outcry, like somebody being killed and calling for help. Then there was no other sound."

"Why, that's singular."

"It is indeed. I'd like very much to find out what it means."

And the officer added, communicatively, as he was casting searching glances around and up at the front of the dwellings on either side:

"About two nights ago the same thing happened. And early this evening, just after dark, when I was hardly on my beat or once around it, I heard it. I have been trying to be on the lookout for it, but I am baffled."

At that moment the figure of a man came out of a house a pavement above where they were standing and hurried off in the gloom toward Lexington street.

He brushed past the officer and the citizen, apparently not observing them particularly.

While the two stood watching after this solitary and hurried individual, a voice called:

"Officer!"

Turning, they discerned across the narrow street a form in the doorway of a house opposite.

"I would like to speak to you, officer," added the speaker.

The policeman crossed, and the citizen followed.

Each seemed to feel, by the peculiar accent of the voice which had addressed the policeman, that the request had something to do with the baffling mystery.

They found, standing in the doorway of a house with windows singularly closed for the hot season, a woman, who immediately said:

"Did you hear a cry of murder just now?"

"Yes, madam. Do you know anything about it?"

"I know but two things."

"Ah! What are they?"

"I have heard the cry before. I am sure some one is being cruelly handled."

"You do not think a murder has been committed, then?"

"No; else the same cry would not have been repeated so often."

"Well, what can you tell me?" asked the officer.

"I can tell you from which house the cry issues—"

"And that is exactly what I wish to find out."

"There," she said, in an intense whisper, and leveling a finger diagonally across toward the opposite pavement.

Both followed the direction of her pointing finger.

She had indicated the very dwelling before which the baffled officer had paused when he had hastened forward to investigate.

"A—h!" he aspirated.

"There is some dreadful mystery progressing within that house," continued the lady—for she had the appearance of being a lady of some refinement, as both her listeners saw.

And she pursued, quickly:

"Ever since the parties moved in there, about two months ago, they have acted in a strange manner. Observe, if you can in this gloom, that every window, save one, in the front is closed."

They did observe this; they observed, too, that the windows of the house occupied by this lady herself were in like manner tightly shut.

"They have never opened either of the lower or upper windows since moving in, only the one which you see. From that window came, and has previously come, the cry of murder which frightened me so much a few minutes ago. I really think you had better look into the matter."

"You are quite sure about this, madam?"

"Yes—positive."

"Thank you."

The policeman touched his hat respectfully and turned away.

The citizen followed.

"What do you propose to do, if I may ask?" put the latter, who felt an interest in the mystery.

"Can't say till I've consulted with the sergeant, and the sergeant gets orders from the lieutenant," was the evading response.

And the gentleman was just sufficiently sensitive to understand that what was meant by this was, that it was none of his particular business what would be done in the matter.

He lingered for a few seconds, glancing back at the house, then wheeled off briskly on his former way.

Five minutes later the patrolman, meeting his sergeant, told the latter of the occurrence and asked advice.

"Keep a special eye on the house," was the order, "while I see the lieutenant. It's our business to know if there is anything crooked at work in that house. I'll see you again soon."

Silence once more wrapt the locality.

There was nothing further to indicate a continuance of the mystery within the strange house.

But the officer made it his business to ascertain the number.

While the policeman on his lonely beat, with a "special eye" to the house, was plodding his course around, another scene was transpiring at the marshal's office.

At this rather late hour for business, a man had entered and requested an interview.

A man of saturnine countenance and shaggy brows, with a growth of beard that had been closely clipped.

His eyes were almost a mixture of gray and brown in color, having a steady, nearly glaring glance, and his speech was as if each word was chiseled from between teeth that seemed desirous of remaining clinched while he spoke.

His attire was very genteel, and in the well-fitting garments it was plain to be perceived that he possessed considerable muscular strength.

"I have called to get both advice and assistance," he said, "in a rather sad case. I believe you are the proper person to apply to in the matter."

"What is the business, sir?"

"It is in relation to an unfortunate niece of mine. She is a raving maniac. I have tried to conceal her from public view; but at last it seems necessary to confine her, both for her own safety and that of myself and wife. We have lived in seclusion at No. — St. Paul street, since coming to Baltimore to live. But of late her malady has taken such a violent turn that it is impossible for us longer to sustain the ordeal of watching over her. Will you give me your advice?"

"The only advice I can give you in such a case, Mr.—"

"Ensor, sir—Michael Ensor."

"The only advice I can give you, Mr. Ensor, is to get three physicians of well known respectability and integrity, to examine your niece and pronounce upon her disease. If they certify positively to her being afflicted with a dangerous insanity, perhaps it will not be difficult, after some other formalities, to have her placed in a proper asylum. Though I must tell you that the Baltimore asylums are at present pretty well filled up and it may require more than ordinary effort to place her in a public institution—"

"I am able and willing to pay well for the safety and comfort of my poor niece," Ensor broke in, earnestly.

"You can only pursue the course I have suggested."

"Thank you. I will act at once—this very night, if such a haste is possible. I am very much worn out, sir, with my attention to my poor niece, Erminie. I want to see her placed safely away as soon as I can."

He withdrew from the office with the evident determination of losing no time in procuring the physicians necessary to pass judgment upon the young lady in question.

Hardly had his form disappeared beyond the door, when the chief tapped a bell that was upon his desk.

A clerk appeared.

"Is Mr. Magic about?" he interrogated.

"He's just gone to the coffee-house for a lunch, sir."

"Go after him and say that I want to see him as soon as he is through with his lunch, on a matter of business."

The clerk departed.

When Magic received the message from his chief, he made brief his meal at the coffee-house and hurried to the office.

The same daring, shrewd and always successful detective whom many readers have seen in the mysterious affair of Borgia, the Faro Queen, which for a spell filled the papers of Philadelphia with a sensation shortly before this night when our hero was destined to start out upon a new and highly exciting trail.

"On hand," he said, smilingly, as he entered the presence of his waiting superior.

"I have a little matter here for you, Magic, which may amount to something and which

may not. You are a good man to ascertain whether there is anything in a suspicion or not, as I have found in your services in the past. The case is simply this: A gentleman was in here a few minutes ago, asking advice about having a niece of his confined in a lunatic asylum. I gave him such advice as I deemed proper. He evinced a remarkable desire to hurry matters, not being willing, apparently, to wait for the daylight of to-morrow to carry out the plan of having physicians summoned to examine the young lady. His appearance is, I must say, that of a rogue in luck—a villain who probably has enough money to live on in a respectable manner, but nevertheless, a villain. I am not to be deceived easily by faces, as you know. And I detected that a portion of his facial aspect was made up. That in itself is highly suspicious. I want the man and his motives investigated. You haven't much to do at present. Shadow Michael Ensor, whose residence is No. — St. Paul street."

"All right. I'll take it up at once."

"I can put you a good way on the road at the start. Go there at once and introduce yourself as being sent by me, in my desire to assist Mr. Ensor in his object concerning the girl."

"I see. I will be one of the doctors."

"Exactly."

"Don't forget my name, then. I am Doctor Bayne Bramble, recently from the Eastern Shore, and a personal acquaintance of yours for many years. Now I'm off."

Mark Magic hastened away on this quickly appointed duty.

At a restaurant diagonally opposite the City Hall, he entered and sought a room which he was accustomed to use at will, having an arrangement with the proprietor.

Fifteen minutes later a decidedly medical-looking gentleman emerged upon Lexington street and hastened westward.

He was attired in a full suit of black, with close collar, above which showed a scrupulously even band of linen; he wore lisle gloves and carried a gold-headed cane. On his face was a growth of highly English whiskers, and above his nose gleamed a pair of large, gold-bound spectacles.

CHAPTER II.

THE BEAUTIFUL MANIAC.

THE bell at the door of the house No. — St. Paul street was pulled in a peremptory manner that was so loud as to be audible on the pavement outside.

This first summons did not bring any response.

But upon repeating the ring, a voice inquired, from that window, in the second story, which was the only one open at the front:

"Who's there?"

It was a woman's voice.

The accent was forcibly sharp.

"I have called on business concerning Mr. Ensor," replied the disguised detective.

"Mr. Ensor is not in—"

"But that will make no difference, madam. He has just been to the marshal's office, and I have been sent here by the marshal, in response to his expressed desire for some assistance in a sad case here. I am a physician. If you will please admit me, I will await his return."

She seemed to be hesitating, then said:

"Wait a moment."

A light presently glimmered over the transom of the door, and the woman admitted him.

"Walk in," she said. "I expect that Mr. Ensor will not be absent long. He well knows that I dislike to be left alone with the unfortunate case we have in this house."

"A very sad case, madam."

"Yes, my niece— You have heard, I presume?"

"I understood that she was suffering with a malady of insanity, and that Mr. Ensor desired to consult physicians without delay in regard to having her confined in an asylum."

"Yes, that is it. Be seated, sir," conducting him into a spacious parlor.

And she added, while lighting the gas jet:

"We have borne our task with Erminie until it seems impossible to sustain the strain longer. Erminie is the name of our niece—"

"You are Mrs. Ensor, I presume?"

"Yes."

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said, handing her a card.

Magic was a splendid penman.

Before leaving the restaurant where he had effected his disguise, he had written a few handsome cards for himself, bearing the name:

BAYNE BRAMBLE, M. D.

He took a keen survey of the lady before him.

She appeared to be about forty years of age. There were traces of her having been a very handsome woman in earlier years; but these seemed to have been almost obliterated by something more than mere years of life; there was a certain perceptible expression about her black eyes and in the mold of features, which indicated that the mind had long borne a severe strain, the result of which was to give to her manner a slight nervousness and restless way of

glancing at the party with whom she might be conversing.

"My husband has been fortunate in securing a physician from so reliable a source," she said, after glancing at the card. "I think Michael will return shortly, then we will lose no time in arranging for our niece's departure for some safe asylum—"

"Pardon, though," broke in Magic. "I am but one of three who will necessarily be summoned to examine your niece."

She raised her brows in a slight surprise.

"Does it require so very much formality?"

"It does, madam. A young girl cannot be confined in any asylum here merely upon the representation of a single physician—especially if they are destined for a public asylum, and that seems to have been the desire of your husband."

Magic thought he saw a dissatisfied look overspread the woman's face; but it was gone so quickly as to render it doubtful.

"Of course we must do exactly as is required," she said.

"What is the age of your niece?" Magic asked.

"Nearly twenty-one. She has been in our care ever since her mother died. And I may tell you, doctor, that at the time of the death of Erminie's mother, the latter was known to be affected, though not as dangerously as Erminie now is, with the same unfortunate malady."

"Is the young lady constantly in the spasm of her affliction?"

"Oh, no. But the intervals are rapid; and sometimes we have had to sit up with her all night, even being compelled to hold her in our grasp, to prevent accident to her or to ourselves. We have never had the heart to bind her—"

"I wonder that you have not summoned medical attendance before this?"

"Ah, but we have done so. Every doctor who has seen her has told us that it would be utterly useless to administer any medicines to her; her malady is one of inheritance. We have concluded at last, that we have done our duty as far as could be reasonably expected of us. She must be confined in an asylum," and the last words, Magic thought, were unnecessarily emphatic.

"You keep her locked up, of course?"

"Only at those times when she seems about to break out in one of her spells. At other times she is allowed full liberty. She had one of the spells to-night, only a short while ago. Now she is gentle enough and is at this moment seated at a window up-stairs, or was when you came in."

"Would there be any objection to my seeing her?"

"Oh, none at all. If you will follow me, you shall see and converse with her. I warn you, however, that nothing is to be gained by a conversation, as you will find. Come this way."

Taking up the lamp which she had set upon the table, she led the way from the parlor.

Magic observed that the house was kept in total darkness, excepting this lamp which Mrs. Ensor carried about with her.

At the door of the front room in the second story she entered.

By the light of the lamp, Magic saw a young and remarkably lovely girl seated quietly by the window, gazing out at the starry night.

Upon their entrance she arose.

She turned upon the strange comer a pair of large, hazel eyes that were almost of an unearthly luster and beauty.

Her hair was loose and opulent, falling like a brown wave over her shoulders and contrasting with the pure whiteness of a light summer garb which she wore.

"Erminie, I have brought another doctor to see you. Speak to him, dear."

But the girl remained silent, standing and gazing intently at the doctor with those large and wondrous eyes, as if she was trying to recognize in him some one whom she knew.

Mrs. Ensor placed a chair for the doctor.

"Will you speak with me?" the detective inquired of the beautiful girl, softly.

"I am crazy!"

The three words came with such suddenness and in such an accent from the red lips of the girl, that Magic, despite himself, experienced a cold shudder.

"That is one of her persistencies, doctor," Mrs. Ensor said. "Unlike most insane persons, who seem to think that they are not crazy, Erminie is set in the conviction that she is crazy."

"A little out of the usual order, I must admit," said Magic, in a low tone.

The hazel eyes of the maniac kept steadily upon him; like a lovely statue robed in summer white, motionless she stood while fixing unwaveringly upon him that strange gaze.

But before more could pass between them, the front door was heard to open and close.

A man's step sounded in the lower hallway.

"Ah! it is Mr. Ensor returned," remarked she, rising and taking up the lamp, with which she moved toward the door. "Please excuse me for leaving you in darkness an instant, as I wish to light his way up the stairs."

Even the detective, inured as he was to

strange situations and moments of peril, felt a thrill at suddenly finding himself thus left alone in a dark room with the beautiful maniac.

And while he sat silent on his chair, awaiting the return of Mrs. Ensor, something positively startling transpired.

He heard the rustle of garments before him.

A form—the form of the girl—brushed close to him.

One of her hands—a hand that was almost as cold as the hand of a corpse—reached and fell upon his wrist.

Then something was thrust into his palm—a piece of paper—and the hand that placed it there forced his fingers shut upon it tightly, as if to fix it secretly there.

At the same time a quick, strained whisper entered his ear, coming from lips that bent low and close:

"Keep it! Don't let anybody see it! If you can find the man whose name is written on it, do so for the love of Heaven, and give it to him. Guard it!—guard it!" and as just then the light borne by Mrs. Ensor began to approach, the girl started back, placing both hands to her temples, as if in sudden pain, at the same time half-wailing:

"I am crazy! I am crazy!"

Michael Ensor, accompanied by his wife, entered the room.

He glanced a little suspiciously upon the detective.

"You say you are a physician, and that you were sent here by the police-marshal?" he interrogated, immediately, as Magic rose to meet him.

"Yes, sir. The marshal, seeming to think that it would facilitate your object to have a physician among those who will examine your niece who is well-known to the authorities, has sent me to offer my services. My card, sir," and Magic handed forth another of the cards he had so judiciously provided for the occasion.

"Perhaps this is fortunate," Ensor commented, when he had read the name. "I could only see two physicians to-night, and both stated that it would be impossible to attend before to-morrow. Have you examined my niece at all?"

"Not yet. I have only been here a few minutes. Indeed, I really think it best that there be no examination before all are present who are to be engaged in the task."

"But you surely can form some idea regarding her, can you not?" persisted the man. "Examine her head—question her—do something. I feel that I want something done—something. I am so worked up by what I and my wife have had to pass through recently, that I suppose I am a little nervous."

And Magic saw that he was nervous.

Strangely, this nervousness was perceptibly like the restlessness which he had noted in the manner of Mrs. Ensor.

The trial of the two, with the charge of the crazy girl, must indeed have been fearful, to have wrought them up to such a pitch of unrest and anxiety.

"I can only oblige you in an informal manner," Magic agreed. "I would not feel warranted in expressing my convictions too emphatically from such an examination until the other doctors whom you have summoned are present—"

"Have you ever had any experience with insane people?" Ensor queried, as Magic moved gently forward to the girl's side.

"Oh, I have had nearly a score under treatment; and on the Eastern Shore, where I practiced before locating in Baltimore—which I really did at the solicitation of my personal friend, the marshal—I was accounted an expert at such cases."

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Ensor believed that, in the position which he then occupied, with his back almost wholly toward them and apparently facing the girl, he could see the peculiar glance which passed between them at this speech.

But Magic did see it.

He detected in the faces of the man and woman something like a new uneasiness as their eyes met.

Unfortunate Erminie submitted to his touch without a murmur.

He gently passed his hands over her head, in a feeling way, much like the proceeding of an experienced phrenologist.

And again, as he cast that unobserved glance upon the two behind him, he saw that they were almost bending forward to catch what he might say while conducting that silent examination in the style of one versed in craniology.

Then he drew back after a little over a minute.

"What is your opinion?"

"I would prefer to submit it to the physicians," replied Magic.

"But you must have found that the organs of her mind, as betrayed by the skull, are affected?"

"More or less."

And he saw that this caused a second glance of uneasiness to pass between the two.

Magic's strongest suspicions were aroused.

He did not believe that the girl was at all insane.

In his own mind he had decided that some

dark plot was enacting to compromise the liberty, if not the life, of beautiful Erminie Ensor.

CHAPTER III.

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER.

BOTH Mr. and Mrs. Ensor seemed to be greatly disappointed that this physician would not express himself definitely regarding the case of Erminie.

The girl had herself drawn slightly back when the supposed doctor had finished his examination of her head.

She was regarding the group steadily with her large hazel eyes, into which now seemed to have come a stare of vacancy that added to her insane appearance.

"We would have liked, very much," said Mrs. Ensor, "to hear your opinion."

"Yes," supplemented her husband.

But Magic protested.

"I think I understand my duty to my fellow-physicians too well, if you will allow me to say it, to express an opinion in this case before we have each conducted an examination and then compared opinions. You must remember that such cases are of a peculiar character—not ordinary, by any means."

And he asked, after a second's pause:

"When did I understand you to say that the doctors whom you have summoned will be here?"

"At nine o'clock in the morning."

"Very well, I shall make it my duty to be here. That is," he said, with a searching tone, "if you desire that I, as a friend, recommended by the marshal himself, shall take part in the investigation—"

"Yes," declared both, in almost similar words, "we desire it."

"You may depend upon me, then," said Magic, with a bow, as if he felt honored by the appointment as one of the investigating physicians. "And now, if you please, I think I will be going, as the hour is somewhat late, and I have a patient to look to in the eastern end of the city before I retire."

They started toward the door, Magic preceding them.

Something seemed to influence the detective for a moment as if it was imperative for him to obtain one more glance at the beautiful victim of insanity.

"I hope you are quite sure," he remarked, as they reached the doorway, "that there is no danger to your niece by leaving her at liberty near that open window," pointing toward the window, against the dark background of which the figure in white was outlined.

Neither of the two so much as turned their head.

"No," replied Mrs. Ensor, "I do not think Erminie is in any immediate danger just now. She has had one of her spells to-night, and she has never yet had two spells in one night. She is perfectly safe."

In that transient moment when the detective turned, he had glanced over the shoulders of the two toward the girl.

Another mystery transpired.

For an instant only one of her white fingers flew to her red lips in a way that seemed to say:

"Remember the paper I have given you! Guard it well and execute the errand I mentioned. Let no one know!"

A few moments later Mark Magic was ushered out at the front door and into the stilly street, having again assured the couple that he would be on hand when the other physicians arrived in the morning to conduct the examination.

Hardly had the door closed behind him, when the patrolman of the beat emerged from the shadow of a tree at the next pavement and approached him.

It was not, evidently, his intention to address the comer from the house, for he would have continued past.

But as he passed, he bestowed a keen, suspicious glance upon the one who had come from the mysterious dwelling.

Magic knew the man well.

"How are you, Elkins?" he saluted.

"Is that you, Mr. Magic?"

"Only I—yes."

"Will you step this way a bit? I want to speak to you."

The two moved off.

As they went, Magic said:

"Not so loud, Elkins. I am playing a game back there. Drop my name if you ever see me there again—don't address me at all if there is the least likelihood of any one in that house seeing or overhearing you."

"You've got some business back there?" the officer inquired.

"Yes."

"Then I guess you're on the track of the mystery."

"Is there any mystery?" guardedly.

"Yes, and a big one, I'm thinking."

"What like?"

"Twice there has come from that same house the cry of murder."

"Ah! Tell me about it?"

Elkins proceeded to give the detective the in-

formation regarding the cries of murder which he had heard on that and previous nights, relating the manner in which he came to know the source of the sound.

"There's the woman now," finished the officer. "What woman?"

"The one who put me on the track of the house from where the cries came. She's heard it too before, and it seems that she has located it. She appeared to be mighty anxious that the thing should be investigated."

"Oh, she did, eh?"

"Yes, very."

Magic cast his gaze across the street.

He and Elkins saw the same woman in the doorway of the silent and somber house who had informed Elkins where the cry issued from the open window of the second story of the opposite house.

"Elkins?"

"Well, sir?"

"Keep low about that place. I'm working a game there, I tell you, and I don't want anything to happen that might botch my plans—understand? Just say to the sergeant—and the lieutenant, if he comes around—what I have said to you. You are right in your suspicion. There is a mystery. I am investigating it. I don't want to be interfered with."

"All right, sir. I'll tell them. Shall I keep on the lookout to gather any information about the house that I can?"

"You might continue to do that, and much obliged. But I don't want any one but myself to have that information if there is any; and you will find that the marshal will back this request of mine."

"Very well, sir; I'll be mum."

Magic left the man and hurried toward the nearest lamp-light.

He was eager to see what the paper was that he had received so mysteriously from the beautiful maniac.

Beneath the light he paused and drew forth the paper, opening it hastily.

But he was rather unprepared for what he saw, and an exclamation both of surprise and chagrin escaped him as his eyes fell upon the page which he spread out.

No writing or reading was there on it, excepting the name of a man—no more—not even his address.

The balance of the page was thus remarkably filled:

"2-3 1-1 5-2 1-5 1-4 2-4 4-1 1-3 3-5 5-2 1-5 4-3 1-5 1-4 4-5 2-3 1-5 3-3 5-1 4-3 1-4 1-5 4-3 1-5 4-3 1-3 2-3 1-5 1-5 4-3 5-1 4-1 5-3 2-4 3-2 3-2 2-4 1-1 3-3 4-5 2-3 1-5 4-3 1-5 1-1 3-2 3-3 5-1 4-3 1-4 1-5 4-3 1-5 4-3."

Upon beholding this conglomeration of figures, written in evident haste and with a dull lead-pencil, Magic was at first inclined to think that the girl was indeed crazy, and this piece of by-play on her part was but a feature of her madness.

But when he turned the small and crumpled sheet over, and again read the address on the outside, he was plunged in a most perplexing network of thought.

The name of the party to whom it was addressed was:

William Ellsworth.

And the detective knew that there was at that very moment at the jail, awaiting a second trial on the charge of murder, which had been granted upon a technicality by the Court, a man whose name was William Ellsworth.

Could it be possible that this was the man for whom the mysterious missive of cipher was intended?

He replaced the note in his pocket, and sought head-quarters.

Fortunately for his desire, the marshal was still there.

"Have you found out anything, that you are back so soon?" inquired his superior, recognizing him easily through a disguise he had seen his trusted assistant wear often before.

"I think I have."

"Ah? Well, what is it?"

"There is some mystery progressing at the house of Michael Ensor. I have just learned from Policeman Elkins, of that beat, that on several occasions there has issued from that house a single cry of murder—only one cry, and then nothing more. Other persons in the immediate neighborhood have heard it also. I have seen the young lady who is supposed to be insane—"

"Ah! You say supposed to be?"

"And I say it because I have serious doubts in that direction. You know I am an old hand at 'reading bumps,' as some folks call it. I examined her head—a beautiful head, by the way, and she is an extraordinarily beautiful girl—and I am sure that there is nothing abnormal about the skull—at least, nothing to indicate an affliction of the mind, particularly of an inherited nature, as both Mr. and Mrs. Ensor took pains to impress upon me was the case. I don't believe the girl is crazy. But I believe she is up to some very deep game herself, because she insists herself that she is crazy, and yet she acted in a manner toward me which seemed to indicate that she was encompassed by a great danger and wanted outside assistance."

"How did you act?" questioned the interested marshal.

Magic proceeded to relate briefly what had transpired when he was left alone with the girl for a few seconds.

"This is the paper she gave me," he concluded, passing the slip to the chief.

When the marshal glanced at it, he uttered a short laugh that was half a grunt of disgust.

"These figures! Pah! well, I think it goes to show that she must be crazy, and maybe this is the way she passes her time—"

"And I think you are mistaken."

"You do? Why do you think so?"

"Look at the address on the outside."

"William Ellsworth," slowly read off the chief.

And he added, inquiringly, looking at Magic.

"Well?"

"Did you ever hear of any one by the name?"

The marshal reflected for a moment.

Then he brightened, though there was a doubtful hesitation in his manner, as he said:

"There is a William Ellsworth in jail, I believe, awaiting a second trial on a charge of murder."

Magic nodded significantly.

"Do you suppose that there can be anything between this girl and the criminal?"

"Possibly."

"What are the reasons for the suspicion?"

"Let me see—" Magic paused and seemed to reflect. "If I recall Ellsworth's case aright, he was at first sentenced on evidence purely circumstantial, but which was almost indisputable, for the murder of Silas Armstrong, an aged man who lived alone near the Bladensburg pike. Armstrong lived alone, I say, but not altogether alone, for he had a daughter, who disappeared in a remarkable manner just before Ellsworth was brought to trial."

"What has all this to do with it?"

"Maybe nothing," said the detective, speaking as if his mind was roaming back over a case that had been tried in the courts at a time nearly six months before.

"But," he added, "I remember, Ellsworth said on the stand, as he so strongly protested his innocence, that there was one witness in the world who could clear him—Agate Armstrong. The authorities tried to find her but she had disappeared—"

"Here, here," broke in the marshal, impatiently. "Don't be going over the whole trial, if you please. If you have any suspicions regarding this girl, work them up—"

"I have," interrupted Magic, in turn, and rising, while a peculiar light came into his shrewd eyes.

"Where are you off to now?"

"To the jail."

"To interview this man Ellsworth?"

"Yes, and to see whether he will betray a knowledge of this secret cipher when I thrust it under his nose suddenly. If he does, then I guess I shall start out upon the trail in earnest."

"What trail?"

"The trail of the true murderer of Silas Armstrong!"

CHAPTER IV.

A DETECTIVE'S STRANGE ACTION.

MARK MAGIC did not mean that he was going straightway from the marshal's office to the city jail, where the man, William Ellsworth, was confined.

The hour was then entirely too late for that.

Nearly twelve o'clock.

But the busy detective—in one of those moods which some of the readers of this narrative may have seen him exhibit before, as a man of wakefulness when on a trail—sought his rooms and locked himself in.

Seating himself at a desk, after throwing aside his disguise, he turned on the gas jet and then spread out before him the mysterious cipher which had been thrust into his hand by the beautiful maniac at the Ensor dwelling.

"It's a hard nut to crack, and no mistake," he ruminated, as his keen eyes riveted steadfastly on the paper containing the conglomeration of figures. "Can it be, after all, that this is some mere freak of the girl—who may be crazy? But why should it be of such importance that she wished me to find the man whose name is on the back—a man awaiting a second trial for his life on the charge of having killed old Silas Armstrong? I don't see how in the world head or tail is to be made out of the puzzling thing—even supposing anything is to be made out of it at all," he added, in some vexation, as he tried in vain to hit upon some plan for the solution of the enigmatical figures.

These figures might have related to some manner of key that no other living mortal could ever hit upon—mayhap a book, in which the lines and letters were indicated by the first and second figures.

Availing of his slight knowledge of the printers' art, he tried to solve it from the standpoint of selecting the numbers more frequently occurring to correspond with letters, in turn, that he knew were most used in the "case."

It took him through the long night and until near

daybreak, he sat and cudgelled his brains in vain; the morning found him as far from any knowledge of the meaning of the cipher as he had been at the commencement of his mental labors.

At a very early hour he sought the jail.

He had no difficulty in being admitted to the criminal he wished to interview.

Being conducted to the cell—or cage—of William Ellsworth, he was left alone with the prisoner.

A handsome fellow; tall, muscular, with piercingly defiant eyes and a carriage that was proud even there in the ordeal of an incarceration that might terminate only with his execution.

"Your name is William Ellsworth?" immediately said the detective, in an easy way, and advancing to the narrow cot, on which he seated himself.

"Yes, and what do you want with me? Who are you?"

"I am a detective. My name is Mark Magic."

"What is the object of your visit here?" queried the young man, a little reservedly.

"I want to talk about your case, if you will—"

"It is useless, sir," was the interruption.

"How useless?"

"I have given up all hope."

"Why have you done that?"

Ellsworth laughed in a short, bitter way.

"I can tell you in a few words. I have no more money. All that I possessed was consumed in my first trial. One of my lawyers has decided that he cannot conduct or take part in so desperate a case as mine, when the second trial comes off, without a supply of funds; the other—who I will say has clung to me generously and nobly—is, I fear, hardly able to cope with the State's attorney. Yes, I have given up all hope."

"And yet you said on your trial, if I remember rightly, that there was one witness in the world who might save you."

For a second Ellsworth regarded the speaker searchingly.

"Yes, I said that. And I meant it. If the authorities could find Agate Armstrong, I am sure that such testimony could be given by her as would at least go far toward my exculpation. But the authorities are not bound to find my witnesses; I have no more money to expend in the search for her."

"And you really did not kill old Silas?"

"I have so sworn in the prisoner's dock; I repeat that affirmation now," was the emphatic rejoinder.

"I'm afraid you have but slim chances, young man."

Again Ellsworth indulged that short, bitter laugh.

"No matter," he said, wearily. "I am innocent, and if I am to die, it is better to die innocent, after all, than to go before my Maker with the blot of murder on my soul. I shall try to be resigned to my fate, though it is a hard, cruel one."

"Did you ever see anything like this?"

Suddenly, without the slightest previous warning upon the subject, Magic thrust the bit of paper containing the cipher directly before the criminal's eyes in such a manner that he could see the whole page distinctly.

If he had expected to detect anything in Ellsworth's demeanor upon beholding the cipher that would indicate a familiarity with it, he was disappointed.

The young man gazed straight at the figures for a few moments in utter silence and his glance was perfectly steady.

Then he said:

"What is it?"

"A cipher."

"So I imagine. Why do you show it to me?"

"I asked you if you had ever seen anything like these figures?"

"I never did."

Magic returned the slip to his pocket.

"Is there anything you would like me to do for you?"

To his surprise, Ellsworth answered:

"There is."

But he added in the same breath:

"I have no money, as I told you. But if you will do me a small, inexpensive favor—not at once, but hereafter—I will thank you beforehand for it, because I may not be able to thank you at the time you do it."

"If it is not too much," Magic half-agreed.

The young man advanced and laid one hand on the other's arm.

"It may be," he said, impressively, "that when I leave this cell, I will leave it forever. I want you, on your honor as a detective, to promise me that if you should find any papers of any kind in the cell after I am out of it, you will place them in the hands of the person who has written and given to you that mysterious cipher—"

"The young lady, you mean?"

"I have not said it was a young lady. Was it?"

"Yes."

"Who is the young lady?"

"A niece of a gentleman known as Michael Ensor—"

The detective half paused.

If he had not detected anything unusual in the other's face at the moment of displaying the ciphered slip, he was sure that now he saw a sudden start in the handsome features.

A momentary pallor, too, passed over Ellsworth's cheeks.

He said, however, in a steady voice:

"Give what you may find, then, into the hands of the niece of the man Michael Ensor."

"Why do you ask this?"

"For a very simple reason. I am sure that whoever wrote that to me must have mistaken me for somebody else, and that they feel a kind of interest in my welfare. Perhaps that is only a fancy. But whether or not, will you promise what I ask?"

"I will," replied the detective.

Magic then left the prisoner.

Outside, as he walked slowly along by the rail of the gallery, he was thinking:

"William Ellsworth lied. He does know what the cipher means. While he stood gazing at it he no doubt read it off rapidly and easily. I would give much to get at a solution of it. He cannot deceive me; he knows the niece of Michael Ensor. What is there between these two? And now I am satisfied that the girl is not crazy. I'll follow this to the end."

Hardly had the detective departed, when the whole manner of the handsome young prisoner changed.

The reserve vanished; his eyes sparkled and he clinched his fists together as if in a sudden emotion.

"'Tis she!" burst from him, in a hoarse whisper, while he stared ahead as if he gazed upon some one within the cell whose presence gave him infinite delight. "She is alive and near me! God bless her! She is striving for me, while I—in my unkind haste, have been upbraiding her in my mind for having deserted me in my extremity as I imagined. But I too know the murderer, and if Heaven does not fail me I shall soon be on his track. These walls will not hold me long. Ay, God is with me in the task I have made feasible at last. I shall be out of here before you come to drag me again to the prisoners' dock, ye hungry hounds of the law!"

Having partaken of a good breakfast, Magic prepared himself for his novel ordeal as one of the consulting physicians in the case of unfortunate Erminie Ensor.

Promptly at the hour appointed, he was at the dwelling on St. Paul street and entered to find the other doctors already present and awaiting his arrival.

Mr. and Mrs. Ensor were with the doctors in the spacious but gloomy-aided parlor.

The last comer was introduced as Doctor Bayne Bramble.

"Hope I have not kept you waiting," he said, to the other physicians, bowing.

"Not at all," Ensor hastened to say. "These gentlemen have but just come. Are you ready," to all, "for the examination?"

"Yes, if you please," responded Magic.

Mrs. Ensor preceded them, to see whether Erminie was prepared to receive the doctors.

When they entered the presence of the beautiful patient, they found her attired exquisitely, and, Magic thought, looking more entrancingly lovely than when he had seen her by the light of the lamp on the previous evening.

The front window was bowed. Upon their entrance, she arose and stood before them in much the same manner as she had done when Magic had his brief glimpse of her.

And immediately she said, in her weird way:

"I am crazy!"

The medical gentlemen glanced at one another.

"I may say to you," spoke Magic, gently, "that last night I made an informal examination of her skull. By what I was able to deduce from that examination, I am confident that there is something decidedly abnormal in the formation, which will go far to prove the case, especially under the knowledge which the girl's uncle has given, that insanity is an inheritance on her father's side."

He had observed that the physicians called in by Ensor were young and beyond doubt as yet far down in the ladder of fame as such.

This fact had at once aroused another suspicion in the detective's mind.

But perhaps it was better suited to a plan he had formed that such was the case. He had a strange object to accomplish.

His remark was a feeler.

One of the two advanced and commenced an examination as if to verify what Magic had asserted, and turned to his brother professional, saying:

"Doctor Bramble is quite right. I find the skull much inclined to indicate the symptoms theorized."

The other advanced and in like manner seemed to satisfy himself of this fact.

Magic was disgusted.

He was himself rather a good hand at craniology; he knew even with his little lore, that the girl's skull was as perfect as was ordinary among humans.

"I have satisfied myself," he added, "and if you will please conduct your examination, I

shall be pleased to compare opinions when you are ready."

But the examination was not of long duration—especially as Ensor commenced a long story about several cases of insanity that had been known in the family of the father of the patient.

"I am crazy!" uttered Erminie, once, during the proceedings.

And that was all she said.

Within half an hour, it was decided that the girl should be placed in an asylum as early as possible, and certificates were made out to that effect.

Magic, though himself not a physician, had carried the others completely with him.

Erminie Ensor was doomed to a lunatic's cell.

CHAPTER V.

A HORRIBLE CONSIGNMENT.

MORE so now than on his former sight of the girl, did Mark Magic believe her to be as sane as himself.

But he was playing a little game.

In pursuance with which, he really wanted Erminie Ensor confined in an asylum.

This would take her from the presence of Michael Ensor and his wife; and in his capacity as a detective, Magic knew that he could visit the girl at his leisure and perhaps get from her some explanation of the mystery with which she was surrounded.

To accomplish this while the Ensors had her in charge seemed to be impossible, for by the girl's action on the previous night, he comprehended that she was being watched and that closely.

In the first impulse of a most natural thought, he surmised that these relatives were plotting to get the girl out of their way, possibly to handle some valuable estate—an old occurrence.

But in this trail into which he was gradually weaving himself, he was destined to learn that his surmise was altogether wrong and that he was to unearth a most remarkable tissue of circumstances clustering around the life of beautiful Erminie Ensor and directly relating to the mysterious murder of Silas Armstrong, for which crime the handsome criminal, William Ellsworth was then held in stern custody.

At the instant of arriving at a decision with the other physicians regarding the advisable course with the patient, Magic cast a keen, covert glance toward the pair, Michael and his wife.

Their glances were met.

He saw there the peculiar look that had marked their faces on the night before; only this time it was an expression more of relief from a nervous strain, and Michael even seemed to draw an inaudible sigh.

"Shall you confine your niece at some Maryland institution?" the detective asked, while the certificates were being made out, and addressing Ensor.

"Yes. We have decided upon a private asylum, however."

"Ah! Which one?"

"Barlow's Retreat."

"Ah, yes. In Ann Arundel. I know the establishment. A very pretty place."

They were yet in the room with Erminie.

The girl here evinced some signs of uneasiness.

"I think we had better retire," Mrs. Ensor suggested. "Erminie seems to be somewhat annoyed by our continued presence. Let us descend to the parlor."

She led the way, the two physicians following and Mr. Ensor also walking toward the door, while Magic paused to gather up the papers on the marble table in the center of the room.

For not more than three seconds the backs of all were toward Magic and the girl.

And in that time something transpired of interest.

Quickly and noiselessly Erminie reached the detective's side.

"The paper," she whispered; "you have it safe?"

"Yes. And he has seen it."

"William Ellsworth?"

"Yes."

No more could pass.

Ensor had turned as if expecting to find Doctor Bramble at his side.

With an admirable adroitness, Erminie clapped both hands to her temples, while she stared intently at the detective, and again she uttered that monotoned speech:

"I am crazy—crazy!"

"Coming at once, sir," said the detective, having folded the papers systematically. "I have your certificates," extending them as he spoke and following toward the door.

In the parlor, Ensor said:

"I shall be pleased to have you render your bills, gentlemen, as soon as convenient to you. I do not like bills to remain outstanding."

This remark seemed to highly please the two young medical brothers, who smiled, while one gushed:

"Oh, thank you, but there is really no haste—"

"I prefer a little haste," interrupted Ensor.

"I may not remain long in the city after I have seen my niece comfortably established."

With a few more remarks concerning the unfortunate patient and in sympathy with the uncle and aunt, the trio of physicians took their departure.

When alone in the great house—and when the front door had closed with an ominous clang that seemed to live for several echoing seconds throughout the upper portion of the building—Ensor, with hand still on the knob of the door, said, suppressedly, and gazing hard into his wife's face:

"That much is over!"

"And I am heartily glad of it," she rejoined. "I feared from the beginning that your plan would miscarry."

The saturnine eyes of the man shone strangely.

"No danger, as I told you. The girl is hopelessly insane, no doubt by the knowledge which our own oversight and recklessness gave her. Nothing could have been more fortunate for us, as it is. If Terry Towser should now turn up and take a notion to hunt out the girl, he could make trouble for us—that is, supposing this had not transpired to assure our safety. In the asylum, it is hardly likely that Terry Towser will ever find her, and we will be out of the city before there is any likelihood of his coming upon us here. Now to work."

"What are you going to do?"

"Get a hack at once. I have arranged with old Barlow. He said he was ready to receive the patient the moment we could produce certificates from physicians to the effect that she was a suitable patient for such an institution as his. I think William Barlow is an old rogue. But he is a careful one; he will not take a patient without the certificates—though we could have forged them for that matter."

Taking his hat from the rack, Ensor started away from the house toward the hack-stand at Barnum's.

Rebecca Ensor returned to the room up-stairs where Erminie was.

The moment she entered, the girl exclaimed:

"What have you come back for? I am crazy. The doctors said so!"

She drew herself to her full height, as if she considered the presence of her aunt an intrusion, her staring eyes flashing in a transient gleam of displeasure.

"My dear child, we are doing everything in our power for your good, and it is strange you will not understand it—"

"Keep away from me!" broke in Erminie, retreating a step as her aunt advanced. "I know who did the murder, and I don't like you or uncle Michael. Keep away from me. I'm crazy and I may do you harm—"

Rebecca Ensor interrupted in turn.

Her eyes gleamed wickedly.

"Have I not told you never to speak of that?" she cried, in a sudden rage. "Did I not promise that if you ever again made that speech I would flay you alive?"

As she exclaimed the words, she ran to a table in one corner of the room and snatched from its drawer a small, gutta percha whip as sinuous as a snake.

With this in hand, and her eyes filled with a diabolical ignescence, she made toward Erminie.

The girl had watched her with a sort of fascination.

Now, as she saw the whip, she cried:

"Don't whip me! I couldn't help. I'm crazy!" "I'll flay the flesh off your bones if you don't hush—"

"Murder!"

For the whip was raised with an angry vehemence to deliver the cruel blow.

The one sharp word that issued from Erminie's lips as she shrunk from the expected stroke, produced a magical effect upon Rebecca Ensor.

She dropped the whip and sprung forward upon the girl like a lioness, clapping one hand firmly over the latter's mouth.

For another frightened cry was on the point of escaping from those red lips.

The smothering hand was just in time.

At the instant that the cry sounded within the room, a face was peering through the bowed shutters of the house on the opposite side of the street, and the owner murmured:

"There it is again. I believe they are trying to kill the girl and will accomplish it yet, if her cries don't scare them out of it."

It was the woman who had put policeman Elkins on the scent of the locality whence issued so often the alarming cry.

Erminie did not struggle.

Bent over in the stronger arms of her aunt, she gazed pitifully upward, as if expecting every instant to be more severely punished than by a cut from the whip.

Rebecca Ensor suddenly changed her mind.

"There," she snapped, releasing the girl with a push. "I don't want to harm you, Erminie. But, indeed, some time I'll flay you alive if you persist in speaking of that bad dream you had some time ago. There hasn't been any murder; it's only a dream you've had, that's all. Try to forget it, dear. It disturbs you—and it makes me angry."

"Oh, I wish I wasn't crazy!" half-sobbed Erminie, turning again to her seat by the window.

At this juncture there was a sound of wheels on the cobbles outside and a hack stopped at the door.

Ensor had returned.

Entering and ascending at once to the upper story, he demanded, upon finding his wife with the girl:

"What! not ready yet? Hurry, now. On with your things and I'll bring the man up to get Erminie's wraps."

He was now in some excitement.

He wheeled away again and brought the hack driver up the staircase to the bedroom occupied by Erminie.

Her trunk had been packed in anticipation, by Mrs. Ensor.

It required but a few minutes to prepare for the ride.

Then, with the young patient between them, they were driven off *en route* for the asylum of William Barlow, on the frontier of Ann Arundel.

Erminie remained very quiet during the drive, which was a rather pleasant one after becoming extricated from the crowded mass of vehicles on Light street and entering the more open neighborhood of South Baltimore.

Thence to the bridge and into the sweet smelling airs of the country beyond the gleaming water, over the red sandy road, amid the trees and fields of verdure and truck on every hand.

In an undertone Mrs. Ensor had acquainted her husband with what transpired before his arrival with the hack.

"What if the girl persists in her hallucination when she is in the asylum?" she queried, anxiously.

"Oh, have no fear. I say I believe this Barlow to be a rogue. If he receives plenty of money for his work, he will only slyly attribute her mutterings to an illusive fancy."

"I do not feel as safe as you do."

"Bah!" was all he vouchsafed to this.

At the asylum they were met by the keeper, old Barlow, who had evidently been expecting them.

A short statured man, with a partly bald head, around the edge of which, just above the ears, was a fringe of very white and sparse locks; his mouth continually smiling—or rather grinning—and displaying the only two teeth he had at each side, with a gaping hollowness in the center that made him appear somewhat repulsive.

He was attired in glossy black; and while he grinned and made obeisance to the comers, he rubbed his fat hands over and over as if he already felt therein the money he was to receive for the care of this new and beautiful patient.

"Ah—ah," he said, in a prolonged way of speech; "you've got along, eh—got along all right, I see. Come in. What a charming young lady. What a pity—a monstrous pity. And so gentle, and harmless, you say. Bring her right in—"

"I am crazy!" said Erminie, looking straight at him with her large, strangely vacant eyes.

"Heh!—what's that?" he elevated his bald head quickly and gazed at her in some astonishment over a pair of adjustable glasses which he applied to his steely gray orbs as he received his visitors.

"That is a great habit with my unfortunate niece," explained Ensor. "Unlike most people who are crazy, and who will not admit that they are, she is fixed in the idea that she is crazy."

"Um! yes, I see—I see. Um!" And he added to Erminie: "Of course we are very sorry that you are crazy, my dear; and we shall try to cure you speedily—yes, speedily—"

Erminie interrupted with a long and almost horrible laugh.

And as if the place was a menagerie, where the beasts only wait for some animal to start the uproar, her laugh was taken up by a score of throats throughout the building, throats that echoed, hollowly echoed, screeched, and halloed all together, in a startling, curdling, demoniac accent of omen.

She was indeed in the environs of a mad-house!

CHAPTER VI.

LIBERTY AT THE PISTOL'S POINT.

EVEN Michael Ensor—who was evidently a man of considerable nerve under ordinary circumstances—was startled by that awful echoing sound that ensued upon the laugh of his niece.

To a mad-house indeed had they brought Erminie.

A shudder passed over Rebecca Ensor, and she glanced at her husband in a way that seemed to say:

"Be quick! Let us be out of here!"

Ensor turned to Barlow, saying:

"I would like to arrange with you in another room—one removed from those sounds."

Barlow seemed a little disturbed himself at what had occurred and in a short, raspy way, responded:

"Heh! certainly—of course. This way. Please follow me. The young lady—bring her. Um!" and he started with hasty strides toward the folding doors that separated the room in which

they were standing from another apartment more private.

Ensor grasped Erminie by the arm and led her after the mad-house-keeper.

This second room was more secluded.

But even here there came to their ears an occasional sound of the demoniac laughter which seemed to have been started by Erminie's laugh—as if the crazy inmates of the building would not be quieted.

The girl was perfectly passive.

"I have brought enough to pay for the first month, and a little something over," said Ensor, producing a roll of bills and counting them before fat, though supple, Barlow.

"Yes, of course, certainly."

"The surplus is to pay for the extra personal attention I requested should be paid to my niece," Ensor continued. "I have told you that I want you to have a constant and personal eye upon her. I will not trust to keepers. Though she may appear harmless to others, you know, I want her to be under such surveillance that there will not be the slightest danger to herself—"

"Oh, I understand, of course, certainly," declared bald-pated, grinning, almost toothless-jawed Doctor Barlow, as he rubbed his fat hands over and over in anticipation of the money he was about to receive.

Ensor gave him a sum of money, requesting a receipt.

When the business had been concluded, Mr. and Mrs. Ensor took their leave.

"I have confidence that my niece will be safe here, doctor," Ensor said, as they passed toward the front of the building again, leaving Erminie alone for a few moments.

And he added, leaning close to the proprietor of the mad-house:

"I do not wish the slightest chance to exist of my niece getting at large. I shall soon leave the city, and if she should escape, and if the fact of her condition should become known to the community, it will be a rather disagreeable affair, you know. I am able and willing to pay for much extra attention."

Barlow broke in with grinning urbanity:

"Of course—certainly. Oh, I understand perfectly. No danger, sir, at all, I assure you. Be assured. It is all right. She is safe here. Look around you. Do you see those walls? Do you observe that you came in at the great gate? There are only two gates—the great gate at which you entered and a small postern as it were, at the extreme rear. These gates are always fastened; there is no possibility of your niece escaping. I understand."

He nodded wisely, while he crunched the greenbacks tenderly in his hands behind his back.

A few minutes later and Mr. and Mrs. Ensor had driven off in the hack, leaving the beautiful maniac to the care of Doctor (?) William Barlow.

While the trio exchanged parting words on the broad porch, none saw the pale and earnest face that was watching them from the side window of the wing—a window from which there was a full view of the porch.

The face of Erminie.

From her lips escaped a singular expression:

"There are no suspicions! All works well! Thus far I am safe. Oh, God! what have I not done to procure this thing! I am crazy, and my aunt and uncle have consigned me to a mad-house. Can I liberate myself from it before I am mad indeed, and find William? Let us see!"

And over the wondrously beautiful face came suddenly an expression that would have astounded all who could have seen it among those who had witnessed her appearance at the time of her supposed madness.

Erminie was not mad.

But never had actress behind the footlights of the stage played a part more accurately to secure her present position than had she.

Doctor Barlow was returning.

When he entered the room, he found his new and lovely patient standing in the center of the apartment, playing with her fingers, as if counting them.

"Ah! Um! Eh—heh! yes—my dear, I am here. Do you recognize me as the doctor who was just now with your aunt and uncle?"

Erminie looked at him and said:

"I am crazy."

At the same time she smiled in a manner that was both strange and bewitching—bewitching so the doctor thought.

"I want to see your garden," Erminie added, pleadingly.

"Eh!—certainly. You are fond of flowers? We have a nice garden here, a very nice garden. Of course. I'll show it to you. I'm not going to put you back there with those fiends in the cells, miss, oh, no! You are a privileged character around here, recollect. But tell me now"—and he cast a searching glance at her over the goggle-like though very clear spectacles that he wore—"tell me, now: do you really think that you are as crazy as you believe you are?"

"I am crazy!"

That was all he could get out of the girl, though he put the question a second time and in a plainer form, if such a thing was possible.

And while speaking they were moving toward the garden of the establishment, which fronted on the river shore.

"Are you fond of flowers, my dear?" questioned Barlow, again.

But, without replying, Erminie, as soon as they were amid the winding aisles of bloom with which the place was gorgeous, began nipping off with her fingers a rose here and another there, gradually making them into a nosegay as she walked side by side with Barlow.

He was regarding her covertly.

"A very easy patient to manage, I imagine," was his thought. "And since they are paying well for her, I will have an easy thing of it. I can send her to her room, her meals, her bed, anything, just as I choose to speak. I see—yes. A very easy patient. I wish I had more of such. Well, what's the matter?"

He turned suddenly to confront a man who came running toward him with a face perspiring.

"I've been a-searching for you, doctor, for ten minutes. There's the dogs to pay with that white-bearded chap up in the narrow ward. He's broke loose his lashings, an' if we don't get him down ag'in he'll maybe break out o' his cell. He's a-bangin' at the wooden bars like a giant, I tell you!"

"Here, you remain with this young lady. I'll go and see to it myself."

And stepping closer to the red-faced attendant, he said:

"She's big pay and very gentle—needs a great deal of humoring, understand? Keep an eye on her very closely, but humor her—humor her. A valuable patient, Sam," with which, and without saying anything in excuse to his very "valuable patient," the bald-pated doctor hurried away to the scene of disturbance.

"Day to you, miss," saluted red-faced Sam, to the girl. "I'm glad to see you, miss. You've just come on a visit here, I take it, haven't you?"

"Where has he gone to?" she asked, with a nod to indicate the receding form of Doctor Barlow.

"Oh, no matter about him, miss; he's just gone for to attend to something up at the big house—"

There came to their ears as they thus stood in the flowery path a strange sound.

Like the combined screech of some monstrous and savage bird and the rageful roar of some terrible beast.

It was a curdling sound—and the sound answered, as it were, by a repetition of those horrifying and wild laughs of mockery which Erminie had heard while within the building.

"Let's go a little furdur along the path yere, miss," said the man. "There's some more an' better flowers along down by the gate," he urged, wishing to draw her away from the sounds that came from the mad-house.

"The gate?" she repeated.

"Yes, miss."

"Is there a gate?"

"Oh, yes, miss, there's a gate, an' by the gate you'll find more flowers. You're mighty fond of flowers, I take it. Come. An' Doc Barlow, he'll find us easy enough ag'in."

They moved slowly forward, Sam keeping a wary eye on her and saying to himself she was about the most lovely crazy girl he had ever beheld.

"Here it is," he presently said, as they came around a turn in the path and found themselves before a large and massive gate of bars, through which the water of the river could be seen stretching in a panoramic sparkle.

"Is the gate open?" Erminie asked, inquisitively.

"Oh, bless you, no! no indeed, miss. An' it never is open, only when we hauls up the perversions. Me an' the Doc is the only ones what carries keys to it. He's powerful particular about the gates, you bet. But here's some nice flowers, miss, if you'll have me pick 'em for you—"

He was about to stoop to gather some gorgeously blooming roses at the side of the path, when something of a most startling nature transpired.

"I want you to open that gate!"

In his half-bent attitude, he glanced quickly up and behind him at the speaker.

The words were from Erminie.

Every trace of insanity or simple demeanor had vanished from her presence.

Her hazel eyes were flashing with stern resolution.

And to the dismay of the man she held, in a firm hand, leveled squarely at his breast, a small but large-barreled revolver.

"Why, Lor', miss!"

"Did you hear me? I want you to open that gate."

Experienced as he was with insane patients, he saw that this girl was not crazy.

Every outline of feature was rigid in determination; the glance of her eyes was clear and piercing.

Between the remarkable transformation and the danger which menaced him at the revolver muzzle, for an instant he was as if paralyzed beyond the power to move a muscle.

And once more the voice of the resolute girl, in an accent that caused his veins to thrill:

"Open that gate, I say—or as sure as you are a living man I'll put a bullet straight into your callous heart!"

"But, miss—"

"No delay, at your peril!"

Sam, with his eyes riveted upon the frowning barrel of the weapon, slowly regained an upright position and moved toward the gate sideways.

The leveled weapon followed his every movement; the determined eyes of the girl were upon him with the intenseness of a cat watching for the appearance of a rodent at its hole.

"Make haste," she commanded. "I must be out and away from here. I have no time to lose. Open the gate quickly, if you wish to live—delay until I am again in the clutches of the mad-house-keeper, and you are a dead man, if I hang for it!"

"For the love o' the Lord, miss, lower that pistol."

"Open the gate!"

He saw that there was no use in trying to gain time or deter her from her determination to escape.

Reluctantly he fitted the key to the massive lock and swung the gate open, standing at one side for her to pass.

"There you are, miss."

But she saw through his tricky intent.

He would have grasped her as she made to pass out.

"Come away from the gate—stand off ten paces," she ordered.

When he had obeyed, she passed swiftly through and hurried toward a patch of woods at the beach.

Simultaneously, and without pausing to reclose the gate, Sam started on a galloping run toward the house, his face wearing the expression of a man half scared out of his wits.

"There's going to be a big mess here, I take it!" he ejaculated, as he ran.

CHAPTER VII.

A "CROOKED" MAD-HOUSE.

WHILE this scene transpired at the gate in the broad garden, another and soul-thrilling scene was in progress within the great building.

Doctor Barlow had hastened almost at a run toward the house and up the stairs.

There was some commotion and a bedlam of noises in the upper stories.

More than ever like a menagerie the place seemed, with its sounds of voices that were scarcely human, in screeches, laughter, halloos and loud, wild shouts.

Something was happening to throw the unfortunate inmates of the mad-house into the most intense excitement.

And above all could be distinguished that roaring, frenzied voice—like the combined sound from bird-bill and beast-throat—which had issued from the upper portion and out to the garden into the ears of red-faced Sam and the new patient.

"Why, confound it!" exclaimed the doctor, in a fume. "Sam must be right—the old Rip Van Winkle must have broken loose again. I wouldn't like to lose him after having him so safely in hand all this time. If he would only reveal what I want him to—But no matter; I'll keep him here till the day of his death, if he continues obstinate."

When he reached the top of the stairs, he was met by a stout and vile-visaged woman.

Sam's wife.

Her arms were bare to the elbow, and at the moment she was breathing hard as if from some recent exertion.

"There's a mess here!" she said, as her employer came up.

"Um! yes—I suppose so, by this infernal noise—"

"The white-bearded chap was near getting out. I was just in time to double bar the door on the outside, or he'd 'a' been off for good. He'd ripped off his lashings from the floor an' was just a-boundin' to the door when I spied him."

They hastened along the corridor toward an apartment whence continued to come those terrible howlings and cries.

Howlings and cries that mixed with the other pandemoniac noises; for as they went, they passed doors the fronts of which had been accommodated to heavy wooden bars half-way up, and at these bars were numerous faces of startling mold, gaping mouths that vented curdling chatters and yelps, staring orbs that looked forth with a ghostly vacancy, dirty hands that grasped and wrenched savagely at the bars, as if to tear them from their firm sockets.

A mad-house indeed was this establishment of Doctor Barlow's.

There appeared to be no mild cases here; all, all were of the most hideous type of insanity, beyond all hope of cure.

At a door at the further end of the corridor they came to a halt before a personage that was outlined against the dim light from an unusually narrow window at his back.

He glared upon them in a way as if he hungered for their lives, and his fingers coiled around the bars like eely vises.

"Ah-a!" he shouted, shrilly. "I nearly beat you that time. I was near getting out. And if

I had, and if I could have fastened these hands on your throat, you villainous doctor, I would have rid the world of a fiend. Dare you let me out?"

"Back, there! Back to your corner, you foul thing!" shouted in return the excited doctor, who feared that the man's endeavors might indeed burst the stout bars from their places.

"I won't 'back'! I shall stay here and fight these bars day and night. And when I do get out, then vengeance!—vengeance upon you who have kept me here in this horrible place. I am not mad, and you know it! You want my secret! But you shall never have it! The day of reckoning will come. I shall yet be free. And then woe, woe, woe to you! Let me out!" and this was followed by another of those rageful roars that might cause the blood of the listener to tingle coldly.

Barlow was greatly excited.

Amid the unearthly noises of the corridor he stood, undecided what to do.

Hurrying and heavy footsteps were heard ascending the main staircase.

Barlow and the woman glanced along to see who it was.

Sam came running toward them.

"Doctor!" he cried. "She's levanted—gone! An' I couldn't help it—I swear I couldn't!"

"What do you mean? Who's gone?"

"The gal."

"What?"

Barlow almost sprung upon him in an excitement now redoubled.

"Do you mean to tell me that the young lady I left in your charge has escaped?"

"That's the size of it," replied the man, with a sort of dogged defiance, as he half-prepared himself for a blow from the doctor's clinched fist.

"She had a pistol, Doc," he continued, in explanation. "An' she, just as cool-like as you can imagine, made me open the gate an' let her out. I had to do it, else she'd 'a' blowed the whole top o' my head off, I take it."

From a condition of supreme excitement, Barlow was now plunged into a fury.

He danced about first on one foot and then on the other.

Then he started on a run toward the stairway, crying:

"Follow me, Sam! Come! Martha, you stay here and watch the fellow in the cage. Come, Sam—come!" and away the two went at full speed.

Sam kept in the rear, however.

"He'll slack up, I'm a-takin' it, when he runs his nose up ag'in' the pistol she's a-carryin'," he muttered:

Out of the house and over the garden-path sped Barlow.

Out at the gate and toward the beach the two went on a quick trot, and at the beach Barlow suddenly stopped short.

At his feet lay the hat and little shawl Erminie had worn.

He recognized them.

And beside the hat and shawl was a tiny bit of paper.

He picked up the latter and read a line that was written on it, his eyes seeming about to protrude through his spectacles.

"I'm crazy," ran the words. "Good-by. I might as well be dead."

"Ho! She's drowned 'erself!" exclaimed Sam, as the doctor read the line off aloud.

They could see the imprints of the dainty gaiters as they led out into the water, led far and presently faded from view.

It truly appeared as if the beautiful girl had committed suicide and had left the hat and shawl to guide them to the spot where she had left the bit of paper communicating her intention.

"Yes, Sam—um! I'm afraid she's done for herself," Barlow slowly admitted, while he stroked his chin and sent his glance roving out over the water, as if he half expected to see her body floating near.

"Hurry back to the house now, Sam. And mind, this must be kept quiet—understand? She was a very valuable patient; she was to pay me a hundred and twenty-five dollars per month. See? Don't say anything about this mishap. She'll be found, but no one will suspect who she is. And I'll divide with you, Sam."

"All right, Doc. I'm mum for ducats all the time," with which the red-faced fellow started briskly back to the house, where could still be dully heard the sounds of the mad humans in the upper stories.

Barlow paused a moment at the water's brink.

"That's a great pity, in one way, a great pity," he mused, aloud, and continuing to stroke his chin. "I hope Sam will be sly enough to keep my secret and we'll have the money all the same from this rich uncle and aunt of the girl's. They said they were going away and probably would never return to the vicinity of Baltimore again. Yes, I guess I'm safe—"

"O-h-o, Billy Barlow!" sung a sudden voice almost at his side.

He wheeled briskly to find a veritable tramp standing near.

The tramp eyed him quizzically.

"Why, save me! if it isn't—"

"Terry Towser! at yer service, old man," interrupted the tramp, introducing himself.

"Terry Towser! Where in the world did you drop from?"

Between the two there was an evident acquaintance.

"Oh, I'm a rovin' duke in disguise just about now, Doc. I've been a-hangin' around yere for some days, I have."

"What for?"

"Only for to see you."

"To see me? Then why didn't you come to the house—"

"Oh, no, I thank ye," with a knowing grin. "I didn't serve you as a helper-keeper in Washington for nothin' Doc. You've a way of gettin' people into your cosey little parlor, like the spider with the fly, an' somehow everybody don't always come out ag'in. Don't fergit 'at I've helped you at them there operations myself, before you an' me split workin' together over at the capital where you kept the other mad-house. I ain't lived with you fer nothin', you bet on that."

"Why should I want to harm you, Terry?"

"I'm going to tell you why."

"Well?"

"You've got a man inside there 'at you're a-keepin' locked up same as other crazy ones. He ain't crazy, an' you know it. But he's got a secret 'at you're tryin' to get out o' him. 'Tain't no use for you to waste your time over him, Doc. He won't tell w'at you want him to, if you keep him there till doomsday—"

Barlow took a quick step to the tramp's side, and before the latter fully comprehended it, had a gripe upon his arm.

"How did you know of this?" he demanded, almost fiercely.

Towser laughed vexingly.

"Why, I was clost to hand when you took the old fellow in. You didn't mean him no harm, at first. But you found that there was a secret of some kind about some money a-preyin' on his mind, an' then you made up to get it out of him. Oh, I'm a-givin' it to you pretty straight, I reckon. He was sick an' delirious like, an' when he did get well, you had him safe enough so 'at he couldn't get away. But you'll never get the secret, Doc, nary time. An' I don't mind tellin' you 'at if you could get it you might be richer by some thousands o' dollars, you might."

The gripe on the tramp's arm was suddenly thrown off.

"Do you know who the man is?"

"Do I? Well, I should smile some. Of course I do."

"And do you know anything about this secret of his? I overheard him mumbling to himself while he was convalescent. If you were near when I took him in off the road out of pity—"

"Much pity you've got," interpolated Towser.

"Well, I took him in. I heard him mumbling about money that he had—mumbling all the time. You and I ought not to have any very great secrecy between us, Towser. Now, what is there about the man and the money?"

Towser's manner suddenly changed.

He frowned upon Barlow leeringly.

"This much," he replied. "That man is worth a mint o' money, an' he's got it hid away somewhere. I wanted it myself. But I got throwed off the track by a pal o' mine w'ot I got in with after I left you, an' who I've been a-lookin' for ever since. Why, the feller you've got inside there was vaulted fer a dead man once, an' that not so long ago. I reckon if a certain coffin in the public vault at the Congressional Cemetery, at Washington, was opened, they'd find it empty, they would, an' that man's the one w'ot was put into it. How he ever come to life ag'in is somethin' I can't explain, I can't. But it's him, an' no mistake. An' it was just one of the curiosest circumstances that I happened to be near, on the opposite side of the road, the night you took him in. I had recognized him a few minutes before. And between you an' me, I guess that's about as good a place as he could be in at the present—for to suit my purposes, I mean."

"Who is the man?"

"That's tellin'."

"Do you know where his money is?"

"If I did, do you reckon I'd be a-wearin' these here rags?" exclaimed Towser. "No, I don't know. But I'm still a-lookin', an' the chances is, Doc, 'at I'll beat you all hollow in the race. Go ahead, Doc. Keep him there," with a jerk of the thumb at the huge building near by. "I don't want him pestering in my way while I'm a-lookin' for his money."

Barlow was about to speak further, but the tramp, with a peculiar nod of his head wheeled off short and started toward the bridge that crossed the river.

"The villain!" burst vexedly from Barlow's lips. "I know why he acts in that way. He has never forgiven me for the punishment I inflicted upon him at my other establishment at Washington. He knows the man. But we shall see, Terry Towser, whether you will outstrip me in the race for the fellow's money."

CHAPTER VIII.

AN AMATEUR DETECTIVE.

THE fact that a beautiful young girl had in all probability committed suicide on that red-sandy shore did not seem in the least to disturb old Billy Barlow, as he had been called by the ragged tramp.

But we leave the vicinity of the asylum, to follow the tramp.

Terry Towser crossed the bridge and entered a car, in which he rode up into the city.

He was familiar with the streets, for he went straightway to that locality of heterogeneous wonders, Harrison lane.

Entering a barber-shop here, he submitted himself to a tonsorial ordeal calculated to improve his appearance.

As he sat there, a veiled female passed the shop, gazing in at him as if he was an object of particular interest.

Then she entered a shop a few pavements above.

When Towser came forth, a dapper little man with an effeminate face, who twirled the ends of an exquisite mustache and switched the curb idly with a ratan cane, was standing there and cast a covert glance at the tramp as he entered the same shop into which the female had previously gone.

He remained there until, after a short space, Terry Towser reappeared, and now there was a positive transformation in the fellow's make-up.

He had on a passable suit of clothes, a new hat, and with his shaved face looked hardly like the one who had addressed the mad-house-keeper on the Ann Arundel shore.

As Towser moved off in the direction of Baltimore street, the young man followed him.

The trail led to the coffee-house.

"I reckon I'll fill up first, before I go to see the old woman," he was muttering, as he entered the place with a swagger.

Producing a greenback, he called loudly for several articles of food, and evinced much disgust when informed, in answer to a question, that he could not be furnished with a mug of beer.

The meal through with, he proceeded westward to St. Paul street and toiled up the steep incline past Lexington street.

At last he paused before the house which has figured in our earlier chapters as being opposite the mysterious house from which had issued on several occasions the one cry of murder.

The house occupied by the woman who had volunteered the information to the policeman as to the source of the cry.

He pulled the bell and was promptly admitted.

Throughout the trailer was close.

The young man was not twenty steps in his rear when he disappeared into the hallway of the house.

And from the lips of this person, there issued a strange muttering, while the grasp on his little cane seemed to tighten.

"Ah, I have you, my fine fellow. Sooner than I had even hoped for have I fallen upon your track. Heaven is in this fortunate circumstance. Now for the police marshal."

He turned and hurried down the street toward the City Hall.

Entering at the door where he was informed the marshal had his office, he found there—not the marshal, but our detective Mark Magic.

"You are not the marshal?" he inquired.

"No, sir. That gentleman has been called temporarily out of town. If you have any important message to leave for him, I will see that he gets it upon his return."

While thus replying, Magic was surveying the young man keenly. There was something familiar about him that struck the detective immediately.

Especially was this the case in regard to the eyes.

And the voice with which the other had spoken was of an even musical, tenor inflection that was truly engaging.

The young man seemed to hesitate.

Then he said:

"I shall be very busy while I am in the city and may not perhaps have another opportunity to call in person. Yes, I will leave a message. It is in relation to the young man, William Ellsworth, who is confined in the jail, awaiting another trial for having committed murder."

"Ah!"

"He did not commit the murder—I allude to the murder of Silas Armstrong."

"You seem very positive. Why did not you appear at his trial then, and give what evidence you could to benefit him?"

"A reason beyond my power to avoid kept me away. But the message I have to leave for the marshal is this. I would like the lawyers of the young man to be visited and informed that there is at this moment a private detective at work in his interest, who has faithfully promised to reveal who the true murderer was within a month, if his trial can be postponed that long. It comes up at the September term, I believe the papers said? I have all my information in regard to what has happened to him from the papers. I have not seen him personally since

his arrest on the charge of having done the deed."

Mark Magic was fully alert as this visitor made the emphatic assertions regarding an ability to prove the prisoner's innocence.

"You are the private detective who is working for Ellsworth?" he questioned.

"I am."

"You seem to be rather young for the business?"

"Perhaps I know more about it than would at first seem probable—at least sufficient for me to conduct the case in hand."

"Where is your office?"

"I have none. Nor is it likely that I shall continue the business after I have accomplished the complete vindication of the young man Ellsworth."

"You seem to be very sanguine."

"I have a right to be. I alone, of all the people on the face of the earth can prove his innocence. I seek the aid of the marshal in so far that I may not be molested—having proclaimed my laudable object—in the use of a badge to facilitate my operations."

"You have not yet even told me who you are?"

"My name is John Ruby. I am from Washington, where the tragedy occurred."

"Do you object to telling me what new points you have discovered in regard to the crime?"

"No special detail beyond what the papers published as the strongly circumstantial evidence upon which Ellsworth was convicted. Silas Armstrong left Bladensburg in a wagon, in company with his daughter, on his way to his farm. Some men, going to market that same night, found his dead body in the road, his wagon hitched to a tree near by. William Ellsworth had been known to start out over the same road a short time after the departure of Armstrong. Between Armstrong and Ellsworth there was a mutually bad feeling because of a lover's attention which the latter persisted in paying to the former's daughter. They had quarreled openly in Bladensburg that same day, and Ellsworth was heard to say: 'You'll not stand in my way when I choose to marry Agate, old man. She's old enough to choose for herself, and I know that I am worthy of her love. We'll be wed in spite of you and at all cost.'"

"Yes, that was in the testimony," said Magic, with a nod.

"Also on this same day," pursued the young amateur detective, "relatives of Silas Armstrong's were expected to arrive and did arrive from Philadelphia, Agate's uncle and aunt. After Ellsworth was arrested, Agate unaccountably disappeared. Shortly subsequent the uncle and aunt disappeared—"

"But all this has been published. What have you new—that is the question?" broke in Magic.

"The something new which I have is, that I am sure I know who was the real murderer of Silas Armstrong and can prove it as soon as I run down an important witness to that fact."

"You expect to find a witness to the fact?"

"I have good reason to say that I entertain no doubt of my being able to accomplish that. Now, will the marshal aid me, with Ellsworth's lawyers and the State's attorney, in having this second trial postponed for just one month, as I know I can do what I promise in perhaps less time than that."

"I will advise with the marshal in connection with your request. It may be that what you desire can be accomplished. Of course the law does not wish to hang an innocent man, while there is the slightest possible chance that he can be proved innocent."

"Thank you for that much assurance. And now, about the badge which I know will be a great help to me in some situations which I may occupy?"

Magic was at that moment occupying the marshal's position *pro tem.*, both he and the deputy being out of town.

"I think I can give you that authority, young man," he said, and still he kept his keen and searching eyes upon the other's face, as if trying to pierce through some disguise that, if removed, would reveal to him familiar features. "You say you only require the use of it for one month, and it is your intention only to use it in connection with this singular case?"

"Yes."

Magic hastily scribbled a few lines on an officially-headed paper which appointed the young man, John Ruby, a temporary detective of the police.

Of course there was no salary; it was only an accommodation in a cause which Magic felt to be a worthy one; for somehow, he experienced a feeling of confidence in the manner of the applicant for favor.

It was by no means his intention to lose sight of this young and ambitious amateur, as he decided him to be.

If he was so confident of his ability to prove Ellsworth's innocence, he must have some tangible clew to work upon.

If there was anything tricky or crooked about the whole affair, Magic was not the man to permit it to go far.

When Ruby expressed his thanks and with-

drew, he did not know that he was being shadowed by the very man with whom he had just been conversing.

Magic was not far behind.

But our detective was so made up in one of his lightning and adroit disguises that no one not familiar with his modes could have penetrated his identity.

Ruby straightway sought the jail.

He was admitted; and Magic perceived that he exhibited his badge to the gate-keeper at the lodge.

"Ah!" he thought, "the young lark had everything prepared, as if he counted upon the permission as a thing for granted."

Advancing and being himself admitted, he revealed himself to the gate-keeper, and asked:

"Who was it that that young man wanted to see—the one who has just gone up to the building with one of the wardens?"

"He asked for an interview with the man, William Ellsworth."

"Ah!"

"He showed a badge, and offered to show papers of appointment as a member of the detective police, so I thought it must be all right. Nothing wrong about it, I hope," continued the man.

"Oh, no; it's all right. I only wanted some information regarding his movements. He's a new hand in the brigade, and I was merely watching to see what he might be up to in the first move he makes for the criminal, Ellsworth."

"Is he working for him?"

"Yes."

Meantime John Ruby was conducted to the prisoner's cell.

Being first searched to see that he had nothing of a contraband nature on his person, he was allowed to speak with Ellsworth alone the limit being ten minutes.

And a strange scene transpired within that cell during the swiftly passing minutes that followed.

When Ruby came forth, the prisoner's face looked exceedingly cheerful. He bade his visitor good-by with a cheerful smile.

"I'm much obliged for your encouragement," he said. "I am sure that I shall soon be a free man now."

"Be of good cheer."

The day waned.

Ellsworth seemed a little restless, so the wardens thought.

He paced his cell till far into the darkness.

When all was still around, save the distant tread of a watcher moving along the galleries, the prisoner stole in stocking feet to the door and took a long look through the bars, listening intently for a few minutes.

"It is time!" he muttered, under his breath.

"Now, then, for my liberty! And God bless my noble friend, John Ruby! For without him I could never have hoped to scale the formidable wall!"

CHAPTER IX.

A PRECIOUS PAIR OF "CROOKS."

TERRY TOWSER was hurried straight along the passageway by the woman who had admitted him to the house on St. Paul street.

Into a room at the rear she led him and pushed open the shutters, turning upon him with something like excitement in her manner, as she said:

"Well, you've come along at last!"

She was a tall, narrow-featured woman, with keen, hawkish eyes that looked straight forward over a pointed nose, and her head, surmounted by a knot of hair arranged negligently, was thrown back somewhat, with an authoritative poise.

"Why, bless my eyes!" exclaimed Terry, as he cast glances of surprise around him. "Where have I dropped into? Come along, you say! Oh, yes, yere I am. But I say, Rustle, old gal—what's it all mean? This here lay-out. You must have struck it rich since you an' me was together in Washington."

The woman had addressed him imperiously at first.

Now, and with some suddenness, she advanced and threw her arms around his neck.

"Terry, you jewel! I have. Yes, I have struck it rich. I'm in business."

"So I should reckon, by your livin' in this here nobby style," and he continued to survey the apartment, which was so handsomely furnished.

"What's it mean, Rustle?"

"I'm fencing."

"Thunder you are!"

"Yes."

"How'd you get into it?"

"Why, I met an old acquaintance in this city after I came here—after the Armstrong affair, you know—and she offered to sell out to me cheap, because she had a fortune out of it already. I've made some strange friends since I saw you last, Terry. And I've got enough for you to do without plying your trade to keep you busy and make a man of you, with money in your pocket—as much as you want."

"Well, that 'ere's the kind of talk to do a man good, anyhow," commented he, upon this announcement.

But he added:

"You're fencing?"

She nodded, while she still clung to his neck and seemed really glad to have him in her embrace.

"You don't carry the thing on in this 'ere neighborhood do you, Rustle?"

"Oh, no, it's down on Harrison street. I'll take you down and introduce you. But now, Terry, sit down. I want to tell you what fools we've both been in this Armstrong matter."

"Fools?"

"Nothing more nor less," as she gently forced him to a chair.

The chair was very softly cushioned, and Terry sat upon it carefully, casting glances down at his own proceeding, as if fearful of doing some damage.

"I suppose you've about dug up the whole farm down in Prince George's by this time, and peeped under every clap-board of the house where old Silas Armstrong lived."

He drew a long and deep breath, like a heavy sigh over some tiresome and vain labor in the past.

"That's about the size of it, Rustle."

"Well, and so you might have gone on till doomsday and with the same result—nothing. Since I've been in my new business that I tell you of, I have learned something in regard to old Armstrong's money. It was because of that I sent you the hurried summons to come to Baltimore at once. The money was never buried at all."

"Why, you don't say so!" exclaimed he, in huge astonishment.

"And the young man, Ellsworth, who was arrested for the murder of the old man—he hasn't ever seen a penny of the ten thousand dollars old Armstrong was supposed to have in a belt on his body at the time he was killed."

"Oh, I reckoned that much. I never thought he had it for a minute."

"Could you guess where it is?"

"If I could, do you reckon I'd 'a' been a-diggin' an' a-spyin' around the old deserted house all this time?"

"Michael Ensor has it."

"What!"

And when he had gazed at her in amazement for a second, he added:

"You're a-jokin', Rustle. How could he have it?"

"That is what I am about to tell you. Mike Ensor is a cuter man than you ever dreamed of, Terry. He wooed your eyes completely. And he is no slouch at a plot, either. The body of Silas Armstrong had not been found when all his money was drawn out of the bank by Michael—sly Michael."

And as Terry continued mute, she continued:

"Ensor was on his way to the Armstrong farm. Of course you and I know that he and Rebecca are no relation whatever to the murdered man; but sly Michael made it appear that he and his wife were his own sister and his brother-in-law. Before you and Michael separated, after the deed—"

"Shut up! Not so loud!" broke in Towser, with a guilty glance around. "What are you spoutin' about?"

"Oh, there's nobody in this house but ourselves, never fear. Well, I say before you and he had separated, and at the very time, no doubt, that you bade one another good-by, he had that money in his pocket in large bills—"

"No!" and his face was a picture of boundless astoundment.

"Michael Ensor, by some means being able to handsomely forge the signature of Silas Armstrong, went to the bank armed with a check and an apparently autograph letter from Armstrong to the cashier, requesting that the bearer, Michael Ensor, be honored in the check which he would present, as they—Armstrong and Ensor—were about to leave the city to start business in the West, and he, Armstrong, had not time to return to the bank in person, as he was busy with preparations for the proposed expedition—"

"Why, what sort of a fairy story is this?" burst from Towser. "An' did he git the money?"

"Yes, every cent of the ten thousand."

"Well, he is a cute one!"

He and his wife came to Baltimore. By the greatest chance, I secured this house, which placed me directly opposite to the very diligent and clever couple—"

"Now you're a-shoutin'. A very diligent an' clever couple," agreed Towser, with several nods of his head.

"I learned all about this much from overhearing a talk among the night-birds that come to my fence and sometimes spend an hour over some social beer in the private cellar. Why, Terry," leaning closer and speaking lower, "the thieves of Baltimore actually know more about the Armstrong affair than all the public put together, and if their theories were to get into court, there'd be a raffle among the detectives, I tell you. But of course none of them care to figure very prominently—they have had turns enough at that already, between the city jail and penitentiary. And now, Terry, I'm going to tell you why I've sent for you in such a big

hurry. I want you to play a game as smart as Michael Ensor's."

"That's me every time. An' you're just a daisy fer plottin', Rustle. What 've you got in your pate this time?"

"Go for the money."

"Go for it—how?"

"I have had a man from my den watching, shadowing, Ensor, ever since I found out where he lived—directly opposite this house, as I told you. I know that he has never visited any bank in this city since coming here; he has not been out of the city. Oh, the night-birds can play at shadowing as perfectly as the police detectives. The money, then, I have concluded, must be wherever Michael Ensor is, and he's too careful a man to carry such an enormous sum about on his person. He's been playing a deep game here, which I only found out this day. You know the girl, Agate Armstrong, disappeared, and that the authorities were hunting for her?"

"Yes, I reckon I know that much."

"She has been in Michael's clutches all the time. They've been abusing her in some way that's set her crazy. I've heard the cry of murder coming from the house they live in several times; and to-day they took her to an asylum—so my shadow informed me. Do you see through it, Terry, you jewel? They've kidnapped her and then driven her crazy, and put her in an asylum. What for—now, what for?"

A strange look came over the man's face.

The woman hissed:

"Agate Armstrong was with her father when he was murdered. Though the night was dark, she may have seen who it was that killed the old man. Michael Ensor now has her safely out of the way. My shadow told me that they took her to Barlow's asylum, in Ann Arundel county, to-day—"

"To Barlow's!"

"Yes. You used to work for old Barlow, didn't you, Terry, when he kept the other asylum in Washington?"

"Yes, I reckon I did," and the peculiar look on his face deepened; he averted his gaze.

Presently he said, after a minute's silence prevailed:

"You want me to skin the house?"

"That's it, Terry. And look here," going to a cupboard at one side of the room—a cupboard concealed by heavy and rich tapestry.

Withdrawing the curtains, she revealed a pile of tools that caused the man to start to his feet with something like delight in his whole demeanor.

"Old gal!" he exclaimed, "you're a jewel of the best kind, you are, an' don't you fergit it." He stepped eagerly toward the tools.

They were burglars' tools of the most approved pattern; with them it would be an easy matter to break into a house or open a safe of formidable make.

He took up and handled affectionately each one there, passing a satisfied opinion on each, this experienced cracksman—for such was Terry Towser.

"There are the tools, Terry," she said. "The house is only opposite to this very one in which you stand. The money is in the house, I feel sure. What shall you do?"

"Why, scoop it in, o' course," he replied, with a significant nod, as he carefully replaced the burglarious implements in the secret cupboard.

At this juncture a small gong bell sounded.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Dinner," said the woman. "I have it sent from the restaurant and had a bell placed on the gate for its express purpose."

She left the room and presently returned bearing a tray.

"I don't ever allow any one to come into my house, Terry. I'm a very secluded widow—you see?"

"Oh, I see, old gal."

She spread the viands on the table in the center of the room and drew up chairs for the man and herself.

A few minutes later and Terry Towser, the tramp of a few hours before, was tilting back in his chair, with a glass of champagne in his hand, holding it up and looking at the sparkling beverage with a broad grin.

"Why, this 'ere's wot I calls life an' livin', I does!" he exclaimed. "An' are you a-makin' all the bobs outen your little fence, Rustle, to give you these yere things o' luxury, eh?" and he twirled the sparkling wine around and around in his glass before swallowing it, as if the sight of it gave him as much pleasure as the tasting.

"I'm gathering in the goods, Terry," she said. "And when I have a good cellar full, I want just such a man as you, my jewel, to work them off for me, and we'll make a small fortune in a short time, I warrant you. Wait till I introduce you to my acquaintances at the fence. Drink and make merry now; for at ten to-night I want you to begin your work, and I must be at my post at the den."

"Here's to you, old gal!"

A routine of quiet revel ensued.

The man and woman partook of the beady beverage and the viands alternately until Towser felt himself a very lord.

The late hours of the day grew later; the shades of evening fell upon the city.

When it was fully dark they had arranged all that they wished to understand mutually—these two crooks—and Rachel Rustle went into another room to prepare herself for a customary departure from the house.

It was near midnight.

"Remember, Terry," she said, as he let her out at the gate which he was to close when she was gone. "You may not see me until daylight. Meantime, I expect to see you accomplish the getting of the ten thousand in Michael Ensor's house!"

CHAPTER X.

CLANNISH ACQUAINTANCES.

MARK MAGIC had placed a "shadow" on the house of Michael Ensor.

He meant to be fully informed of the movements of this man whom he suspected of playing some deep and dark game against the beautiful girl, Erminie.

But the departure of both the marshal and the deputy from the city on urgent business, and himself being left to act *pro tem*, had rather set him back in certain operations upon which he had decided.

The "shadow," at about the hour of midnight, saw a person come from the narrow alley that made in at the side of the house opposite the suspected dwelling.

The figure, in a skulking manner, crossed the street to a similar alley at the side of the house under surveillance.

From a convenient tree the shadow watched.

It had been arranged with the policeman, Elkins, that the detective's assistant would be on duty there and must not be molested.

For his own actions were of an ordinarily suspicious character.

The form that emerged from the first alley and crossed to enter the other alley, was no other than Terry Towser.

Under his coat he carried a small bag.

In the bag were such of the tools as he thought he might need to accomplish his purpose of entrance and probable robbery of the premises occupied by Ensor.

It did not take the burglar long to effect an entrance at the flimsy gate of the house.

He gained the yard.

And the shadow was not far behind and noiseless on the trail.

The lower windows were fastened securely.

But to Towser's satisfaction, he discovered that the cellar door, which was close against the house under the window of what was the rear parlor, was not made secure.

A little prying and a strong wrench with a jointed lever which he inserted under the door, and he had forced an entrance.

Down into the stygian gloom he went.

The shadow followed at a moment when he deemed it safe.

A selected moment and fortunate, for even in the outside gloom there was still enough light to have revealed his form against the background of sky, had the burglar turned to glance behind.

Towser, however, was not looking for danger in the rear.

Though he turned about, after advancing a few cautious steps, and lowered the cellar door.

The shadow was down in the cellar by that time and ensconced in the depression of the foundation.

"I reckon it's all right so far," Towser muttered, in an audible undertone. "An' now for to find the hiding-place of Silas Armstrong's money—supposin' that the old gal, Rustle, isn't off in her reckonin'."

He produced and lighted a bull's-eye.

Waving this ahead, he advanced to the stairs leading upward.

A few minutes later he was in the upper portion of the building, making stealthy observations.

"Hunh!" he grunted. "A furnished house, this is. Ensor must have rented it as it stood. But where's the library? An' maybe I'll have to look in Mike's own bedroom afore I'm on the track o' the ducats. Well, this 'ere's the first little job I've tackled onto o' the kind for quite a while, this is."

He flashed a brief ray ahead from his lantern and deposited his bag in one corner, while he glanced about him.

A face was at the top of the cellar stairs as he did this.

The face of the shadow.

And a shadow it was, judging by the noiselessness with which the man kept on the heels of the burglar.

"It's all right so far," Towser muttered; "but I don't hardly know how to look for this thing, that's all. I'd be awful ashamed o' myself to have to tell the old gal that I hadn't found nothink. I'll not do that, if I have to snatch up some other kind o' boodle."

Closing the side of the lantern, he softly ascended the stairs.

No novice was Terry Towser.

But he was walking into an unforeseen trap.

Hardly had he placed his foot on the landing at the head of the stairs, when he was stopped

in a way that sent his blood for a moment in one solid pulsation—hardened criminal that he was—straight into his heart.

"Far enough!" said a stern voice.

And a hand that was powerful gripped him by shoulder and throat respectively, holding him fast and almost choking the breath out of his body.

Involuntarily Towser turned on the lantern.

The rays of the bull's-eye revealed the presence of Michael Ensor, his saturnine eyes filled with a dangerous fire.

"Towser!" he exclaimed.

It was an evident surprise.

The wily burglar availed of it.

"Well, there! Bless my eyes! If it isn't my old pal, Mike!" he exclaimed.

"What are you doing here?" Ensor demanded.

"Doin'? Why, Mike, me beloved pal, I was only a-tryin' for to get a 'onest livin' out o' some other man's house, that's all. An' you know you oughtn't to be a-findin' fault at that 'ere kind of an endeavor, now."

By the light of the bull's-eye, Ensor eyed him suspiciously.

"Didn't you know that this was my house?" he demanded.

"No—hope to die, if I did."

"Come this way with me; I want to speak with you," Ensor said, with a sudden resolution.

"Anything for to oblige you, Mike, of course. Well, if this ain't the funniest lay-out 'at ever I dropped into! Why, who'd 'a' thought o' me, while I was a-lyin' my 'onest trade, runnin' against my old pard—"

"Shut up, and come on."

Ensor led the way to a front room.

Towser flashed the lantern ahead.

He had been fairly caught at his intention to look for the ten thousand dollars which his accomplice, Rachel Rustle, had insisted must be in the house.

But his wit and the probability of the excuse he had made had saved him from trouble with a man no doubt wicked as himself, and who might have shot him without scruple if he knew the real errand that had brought him there.

"So you're a-livin' here, Mike," said Towser, familiarly, when they were within the room.

"Yes. But never mind that. I have something to say to you."

"I'm a-listenin'."

A loosely-robed figure appeared at a folding doorway at this juncture, gazing in upon them. "I see you have caught the burglar, Michael," said the voice of Rebecca.

"Go to bed, Rebecca. I will be there presently—"

"Who is that?"

"It's Terry Towser, if you must know."

She gave a long and searching glance at the burglar and then disappeared.

"Now to business," remarked Ensor, when he had gone to and locked the door at which she had shown herself.

"Business?" half-echoed Towser, setting his bull's-eye on the floor, and glancing over his stooping shoulder inquiringly.

"Yes, Towser, I don't often stain my hands with a man's blood for nothing."

"What are you a-drivin' at?"

"I am talking about Armstrong."

The burglar was silent.

"It would seem that we had all our trouble with the old—"

"There, now, there you go! What are you a-talkin' about?" broke in Towser. "You ain't no cause to be blabbin' even to the walls about that thing."

"Pah! Tell me. Have you learned anything about his money?"

"Me?—I?"

"Yes, you."

Towser gazed hard into the other's face.

It was on the point of his tongue to say:

"You have the money, Michael Ensor!"

But he said, instead:

"I don't know any more 'an you do. You was to share with me, an' I haven't seen anything of you since the night—I mean the night—you know," nodding his head in a way to convey a meaning as to what he meant regarding "the night."

"And I haven't seen a dollar of the money for which you and I reddened our hands," declared Ensor.

"You haven't?"

"Not one dollar."

After what had been told him by the woman Rachel Rustle, Towser was inclined to consider this avowal a deliberate lie.

For one whole minute the two stood staring steadily at one another.

Then Towser slowly drew a dagger from his hip pocket.

The hilt of the dagger formed a cross.

"Mikey, you are a pretty religious man in some things, I reckon, an' I don't suppose you'll object to takin' a oath that belongs to your religion an' which the same was a part of our obligation when we belonged to that little order o' the cross out to St. Louis afore the police entered us."

"What do you mean?"

"Swear to me on that there cross o' the dagger—an' one cross is as good as another—that you haven't had a dollar of old Armstrong's money in yer hands—will yer?"

Ensor took the dagger promptly in hand, kissing it, said, with some solemnity:

"I have not had or seen a dollar of the money which we expected to gain by the death of Silas Armstrong!"

At the moment this declaration was made, a face was peering in upon the two from the doorway at the head of the stairs.

The shadow was there!

"That settles it, Mike."

"Settles what?"

"I thought you was a-foolin' me."

"How?"

"Why, it's the common talk among the thieves of Baltimore 'at you—or some man who could do it pretty slick—went to the bank where old Silas had left his money an' drew the whole on it—"

"He never had it in a bank," interrupted Ensor.

"How do you know?"

"There was not a bank in Washington that I did not inquire at as soon as we came to town after the deed—you and I. You have been misled—"

"Swear it," broke in Towser, presenting the dagger cross again:

The affirmation was given as required.

"An' the gal?" queried Towser.

Ensor glanced toward the open doorway, as if he half-suspected that some one might overhear.

"The girl must have decided as to who were the murderers, and the knowledge drove her mad. I have kept her closely confined ever since that night, and to-day Rebecca and I took her to an asylum where she will probably remain to the end of her life, if I continue to pay the sum required."

"Whose asylum?"

"A man named Barlow—"

Towser laughed in a grunting way.

"I reckon she'll be safe there," he said, with a nod. "Why, I used to work for old Barlow, an' if I must say it, he's just about the worst that ever was, he is."

"How are you fixed?" asked Ensor, suddenly.

"I'm fixed splendid at the present, I am," replied Towser, with a remembrance of the assurance he had received from the woman, Rustle.

"And I am not. I have not three hundred dollars in the world, and must go back to the old business in order, at least, to get money enough to pay for keeping the girl in the asylum—"

"Wot!—broke!" exclaimed Towser, with a patronizing air.

"Pretty near!"

The burglar slapped him on the shoulder cordially.

"I'm the man can ring you right in."

"How do you mean?"

"Put you on the road to fortune—like you was afore you an' me split after the Armstrong affair."

And Towser added, after a second's pause:

"Get your hat, old man, an' come along with me, an' I'll show you somethin' good fer sore eyes, I will."

Ensor did as requested.

Five minutes later the two were walking swiftly along the gloomy street.

And the "shadow" was close behind.

CHAPTER XI.

MYSTERIOUSLY FREE.

ONE of the many features of Harrison street was the rookery known as Mother Rustle's junk clothing-store.

"Was," because before this narrative is ended, it will be shown to be a thing of the past.

Something more than merely a junk clothing-store was the abode, or rather abode and store; a thing of mystery even to the majority of the older denizens of the vicinity.

Mother Rustle bought other things than clothing.

Many a poor, starving woman—whose rum-drinking husband perhaps had deprived his home of the last cent—had parted forever with some bauble of gold or silver, no doubt a souvenir of better days, at this store.

But Mother Rustle herself had been but seldom seen.

In her stead, and vested with complete authority, was a dark-eyed and rather comely brunette with one of those raspy voices that tell at once of a coarseness underneath the handsome face and plump figure.

Kitty Diamond conducted the business by day—by night, too, though she was but little seen at the latter time, when Mother Rustle herself was present, half-unseen, behind the counter, ostensibly engaged with balancing up the book-accounts for the business of the day.

It was now late at night and Mother Rustle was there at her screened post.

A dull gleaming lamp lighted up the dingy place.

From ceiling and walls hung an interminable

array of all kinds of clothing, until, to pass through to the counter or the rear of the counter, it was necessary to dodge, as one must when progressing through a yard hung with lines on a busy wash-day.

Two men entered.

They were our characters, Michael Ensor and Terry Towser.

Simultaneous with their entrance a little gong bell struck at some spot in the far rear, for its note was but dully audible in the shop.

"Kitty!" called the sharp voice of the proprietress. "Attend to the back door."

"Yes, ma'am," and the girl departed.

The occurrence gave Towser a knowledge of the whereabouts of the woman he wished to see.

"I say, Rustle, old gal?" he called, pushing his way forward through the mass of clothing until his red face protruded near the counter.

"Why, Terry, what brings you here?" demanded the woman, in a subdued voice, as she slipped hastily forward from her task at the little desk.

Then she noticed the other's companion.

Towser gave a meaning nod.

"Do you know who it is?"

Rustle was evidently astonished when she recognized Michael Ensor, and a slight frown came over her face.

"It's all right," said Towser. "He's in a bad box, he is, an' I promised for to show him a rifle for stamps, if he was willing to go into the old business. I 'tended to that other matter, old gal; an' that's how I came across him. I've brought him to you for some instructions, or 'nother, same as myself, you know. Oh, it's all right. Mike's one of us. You've heard me a-talkin' 'bout Mike o'n, you have, you know." She gazed keenly at the man.

"I suppose it's all right if you say so, Terry."

"You just bet it is."

But while this seemed to satisfy her, she was thinking it a very singular occurrence that here should be Towser in intimate company with the very man whose house was to have been robbed that night by an agreement between them.

Towser made a motion with his head, and at the same time said, to Ensor:

"Just you hol' on fer a minute till I have a talk with my old gal, Mikey, about this here arrangement," and he passed toward the rear end of the counter.

Here a low-toned conversation ensued, which was rendered totally inaudible to Ensor by the intervening mass of clothing.

"What are you up to, Terry?" she demanded, frowning.

"Why, Rustle, old gal, it's all a mistake."

"How a mistake?"

"Mike Ensor ain't got no money at all—"

"How do you know?"

"He tol' me so an' swore to it—"

"Pah!"

"Hol' on, now, an' lis'n unto me. He dropped onto me while I was a-goin' through his house. It was a fair catch, it was. When we recognized each other, an' after we'd had some talk about the money, he tol' me 'at he was hard up an' ready fer any sort of a racket. So I brought him here. He swore to it on the cross—an' that's a oath 'at we'd been used to afore we got bu'sted up with the gang I told you about in St. Louis—"

A grim smile overspread her sharp features.

"You're a fool, Terry."

"How?"

"Michael Ensor is pulling the wool over your eyes. This is only a deep game. He will give you the slip again as soon as he has the chance. I say he has the money."

Towser was a man who could be easily converted from one opinion to another.

"Do you think so?" he whispered.

"I am so sure that I mean to aid you in getting him into the gang in my back room. When we get him there, I'll talk to him, and I'll show you that he cannot make a fool of me."

He gazed at her with admiration.

At that instant the girl, Kitty Diamond, returned by a narrow door at the rear.

She had something folded close in her apron.

"What have you there?" asked Rustle.

The girl glanced suspiciously at Towser.

"He's one of us," Rustle assured.

"I've got forks here; the rest o' the boodle's the same as the other merchandise, so I tossed it down cellar."

"Cut up the forks right away," was the order.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who brought them in?"

"Billy White-eyes."

"Weigh them after you have cut them up and tested them, so that I can give Billy credit for his spoils."

Kitty turned to a strangely contrived cutting-machine behind the counter, like two powerful shears, and deliberately proceeded to cut up a lot of silver forks which she carried.

And while she was thus engaged, there were other visitors at the half-hidden counter.

There were two men.

One was a rather tall and muscular-looking

fellow who kept his face considerably shaded by a slouch hat, and the other—

Jack Ruby, the amateur detective!

"I want a disguise," said the latter, addressing Rustle, who came forward to meet them.

And he added, with his almost girlishly musical voice:

"Not for myself, but for this man. We want to buy it out and out, as he is about to skip the town."

"Kitty?"

"Ma'am?"

"Show these two gents up to the dressing-room and wait on them. I'll be up presently to arrange about the price of what they want."

Ruby and his companion followed the girl up a narrow and musty smelling flight of stairs, to a room with a low ceiling in the second story.

It was a veritable costumer's establishment.

Towser leaned and whispered in the woman's ear:

"By hookey! you wouldn't guess who that tall feller was."

"Did you know him?"

"Did I? Well, I should smile! Why, it tain't nobody else but the werry man w'ot they've been a-keepin' over in the jail, so you said, when you wrote to me, for the murder o' Silas Armstrong!"

"Is that man William Ellsworth?"

"Just him, an' nobody else!" declared Towser.

A sudden idea seemed to possess the woman.

"Terry, we know that Ellsworth did not have anything to do with the murder."

"Cert!"

"I want Ellsworth retained here, in this house. He must not depart from here."

"Why, w'ot air you up to now? You air always a-plottin', I know, 'bout somethin'."

"I am going to trick Michael Ensor. I want Ellsworth in my power to confront him with. My reason is a good one. You go up and let him know that you know who he is, and manage it so that he will have to go out by the lower rear room to the stairs against the wall. I will arrange that he does not get out of the room. Go, now."

Towser hurried up the stairs to do as he was ordered.

Rustle had, during their carouse at the house on St. Paul street, fully acquainted him with the map of the interior of her fence; he understood exactly what he was wanted to do.

Entering the room where the two awaited the arrival of the proprietress, he said, at once, to the girl Kitty:

"Mother Rustle wants you down-stairs. I've got something for to say to these gents."

And when alone with the two, Towser added:

"You two fellers are a-wadin' in too fast an' dangerous, you are, an' you hear me."

"What do you mean?" demanded the musical voice of Jack Ruby.

Towser indulged in a low, coarse laugh, then said, patronizingly, as he pointed toward the taller of the two:

"Why, how long do you s'posen it's a-goin' to be afore the po-lice gets that feller inter limbo ag'in?"

Ruby made a slight movement forward, as if startled.

The tall man drew back a pace.

Again the crook laughed.

"You think I don't know you," he said. "W'ot! With this here b'utiful glare o' the chandelier all over yer face, can I believe that me eyes is a-lyin'? Oh, I reckon not. I know you as if you was me own half-breed cousin, me noble Billy Ellsworth!"

Ruby and his companion glanced at one another in unconcealed dismay—then glanced at the grinning Towser who still leveled and quivered one finger with a highly dramatic slowness of emphasis at the man he had named as the recent criminal of the city jail.

Ellsworth it was.

Into his eyes leaped a defiant glitter as he found himself thus confronted by an accuser.

"By Heaven! I will not be taken back till I have accomplished my work!" he exclaimed.

He drew himself together for a spring upon Towser, adding, in a hissing way to Ruby:

"I'll down him, Jack—you make the lead and we'll be out of this hole—"

"Now hol' on!—hol' on!" quickly ejaculated Towser.

"Why what are you a-goin' for to do, say? Are you a-goin' to pitch into about the werry bes' friend w'ot you've got in all Baltimore at this blessed minute?"

They paused before him, on the verge of what they intended for a desperate attempt to escape from the house.

Towser glanced around as if to make sure that there were no listeners; then he tip-toed to their side.

"There ain't no occasion fer you two to be skeert. I'm a frien', I am, an' you kin bet onto it. Why, you've just struck it to a dot, a-comin' here. We're the boys fer to take you in an' care for you like a brother. You couldn't have struck any better place fer to save your life. There, now, put on them disguises I see'd you a-fingerin' when I kem in, an' I'll show you a way out o' here into a dark alley where you can skip fer the de-pot an' no danger o' the detectives a-seein' of you—"

"How did you know that I was the man known as William Ellsworth?" demanded that young man, keenly.

"Know? Why, bless yer innercent heart, the thieves o' Baltimore hes all been in sympathy with yer since the fu'st day o' your trial, they have. They ain't one on them believes that you did the little job on Silas Armstrong. Oh, we knows all about it. An' here's meself, Terry Towser, w'ot's ready fer to aid you in lightin' out fer a league or two. You just come along with me—after you've got into them riggin's—"

"Terry Towser," broke echoingly from Ruby.

"Yes, that's my handle, youngster."

Towser did not observe that the utterance of the name had caused Ruby's eyes to slightly dilate.

CHAPTER XII.

A TABLEAU IN THE ROOKERY.

ELLSWORTH it was who thus stood remarkably free, in the rookery of Mother Rustle, confronted by a man who seemed to know him beyond all doubt.

The sputtering and smoky-chimneyed lamp in the bracket at one side—which Towser had designated as a chandelier—revealed his features plainly.

And somewhat to the young man's surprise, he felt a tug at his sleeve, while Ruby said:

"How do you know that we are so very anxious to get out of the city?"

"Oh, that 'ere follers, w'en a chap breaks jail."

"Well, you are mistaken."

Towser looked a little astonished.

"We don't want to get out of the city at all."

To the contrary, this man wants just such a hole as you're hinting at, where he can hide himself. It may be that when the matter has blown over, and when he can safely venture out in a rig-up, he will become a first rate member of your gang—"

"Of whose gang?" asked Towser, warily.

"Why, are not you one of the gang?"

"What gang?"

"The thieves of Baltimore, of which you have just been speaking. Come, he won't go at all, now—neither will I. We want to join, since you've given it away so plainly. You're the very man I'm looking for."

Ellsworth gazed at his companion with amazement that was genuine and not concealed.

But again came the warning tug at his sleeve.

And while Towser seemed to be a little perplexed by this turn of affairs—which was not in accordance with the programme between himself and Mother Rustle—Ruby said again:

"What do you suppose a man breaks jail for if he doesn't want to be set free? And what's the use of being free without a chance of making something to live on? Why, my friend, we couldn't, as you say, have struck a better place than this. I suppose this is a fence, or a den, and here's where we're going to stop. Where are your friends? Show them up. Make us acquainted. This is as good a place for a man to put himself in pickle till the noise wafts over as any other place."

Towser was completely won over by the off-hand freedom of this speech. He grinned in a highly pleased manner.

Still it was not in accordance with the programme.

And he then began wondering why it was that Rustle delayed so long in giving a signal that had been agreed upon between them to signify the moment when she would be prepared to capture and detain the escaped criminal, William Ellsworth.

"Jest wait a minute," said Towser, as he stepped to the head of the stairs.

Here he called out guardedly:

"Rustle! I say, old gal!"

"Hush up there! What's the matter?" answered the voice of the woman from the foot of the stairs.

"Come up yere. The gents wants fer to have a tork with you."

"I can't come now. I'm lusy. I've a customer. Hold them till I give the signal—"

"But that's all bustled. There ain't no signal needed. They're a-goin' fer to stay—Rustle?"

But she had withdrawn from below, and he knew that she would not wish, whoever it might be in the shop, to hear their conversation.

In the few brief seconds that Towser was at the stairs talking with the woman, Ruby had whispered to his companion:

"The most fortunate thing in the world for us has happened within the last minute."

"What like?"

"Did you hear that man give his name?"

"Yes."

"Terry Towser."

"Yes."

"You will be astonished when I tell you that we are now on the trail in earnest. That very man is the witness I would have turned the whole earth to find. Heaven is with us. We shall triumph in the end, and soon. Terry Towser is the man who can prove, as a wit-

ness, who it was that killed Silas Armstrong. Do you not see through my purpose? We must join this man's gang—his gang of thieves that he hinted at, supposing of course that you, because you escaped jail, must be a hardened criminal like himself. He was rather unwary. Do not give a sign to betray our real object. We must become members of Terry Towser's gang of Baltimore thieves if we hope to follow out our plans—Hush!"

Towser had turned back from the steps.

"It'll be all right in a minute or two, my covies," he said, nodding confidently. "The old gal's busy, an' she'll give a signal presently—you see if she don't. Then you just foller me, an' I'll interduce you to the boys o' Mother Rustle's leetle shebang, I will. Oh, I reckon you'll find 'em a jolly crew,"—though Towser himself had not yet been inducted into the mysteries of the sly fence that was thus flourishing on Harrison street.

Meantime he busied himself in assisting Ellsworth with the arrangement of the disguise with which he had been supplied by Kitty Diamond at his own request.

An admirable disguise, that would have effectually shielded the escaped criminal from probably the keenest of the detectives.

Hardly was this accomplished, when the looked-for signal from Rustle came.

"Now, you just foller me," said Towser, nodding confidentially, and moving toward the door.

Instead of descending the stairs, he led them along a corridor so very dark that Ruby had to grasp the crook's sleeve, and in turn Ellsworth grasped the sleeve of Ruby, for guidance.

"It's a mighty dark road along here, gents, but when we gits to the end you'll find light enough, I reckon, an' the boss o' the gang 'll be there for to receive you."

At the end of a dozen steps Towser butted against a door, which he could not avoid under the mere instructions he had received from Rustle.

In response to the noise he thus made, the door was flung wide, and a glare of light flowed out.

The three stepped into a strange room.

Comparatively bare it was, with a center-table without any cloth, and at the table sat three men.

At one side stood a fourth man.

The party who had admitted them was Mother Rustle herself.

One of the men at the table had a single eye—a very white eye, and the others had countenances that were brutish and villainous; the face of Michael Ensor as he stood there—having been brought there by Rustle—was no less the visage of a criminal than the rest.

The police marshal had not uttered his opinion astray when he had told Mark Magic that he believed he saw in the features of the resident on St. Paul street that which indicated the character of a rogue living genteelly.

"Come, hurry," said the woman, with a nervous sharpness. "Get the gents out o' here, Terry. I've no time to be wasting with such as I guess they are—"

"But hol' on, old gal," interrupted Terry. "They don't want to get out at all. They want to join the gang."

"What gang?" with increased sharpness, and as if she did not wish to understand.

"Come, my good woman," spoke Ellsworth. "I think you are a little on the crook here, and we want to come in, that's all. I'm just out of jail, as your friend of the owl's nose discovered, and I suppose you don't object to a jail-bird getting his work in with you, if he can do it handsomely when the chance happens."

"That's the talk," spoke up one at the table.

"But who is the chap, Rustle, anyhow?"

A change came over Rustle.

She knew that Towser had accomplished the winning of the two strangers into the circle.

So she said, a little more quietly:

"One of them is Billy Ellsworth, the man who was in jail under sentence for killing old Silas Armstrong. The other man I don't pretend to know. This man," and she touched Towser on the shoulder, "is my absent husband that I've spoken to you about."

"Happy fer to make your acquaintance, gents," said Towser, swaggering forward, with dirty palm outstretched to shake with the three ruffians.

"Sit down, and we'll have a talk," said Rustle, pushing stools forward for the newcomers into the rookery.

Throughout, none had observed the face of Michael Ensor.

That is, none of the burglarious crowd.

But the keen eyes of Rustle were noting his every movement and expression as she made free with the addition to her crooked band in that little back room.

"Come," she said to him. "Step forward, Mikey, and join your fresh pals. They'll make rum ones, I reckon."

"That they will," supplemented Towser.

At this moment Ruby, who was steadily regarding Ensor, said:

"What are you looking at me so hard for, old man?"

The saturnine eyes were riveted upon the effeminate young man.

Then suddenly he stepped forward, coming close.

"Haven't I seen you before?"

"I hardly think so," the musical voice replied.

The hazel eyes and the saturnine orbs remained for a second steadily gazing each into the other.

"But I'm sure I have."

"Why, there, now!" exclaimed the man with the one eye. "Why don't you let up on the little feller?"

"Hush, you!" retorted Ensor, with something like anger in his tone, and glowering upon the speaker. "I know my business."

"Hel-lo—hel-lo! wot d'ye soy?"

"I have seen this person before," declared Ensor, peculiarly.

"An' what if you have?" demanded Towser, who did not believe that Ensor had seen the party ever before.

"A great deal. And I think I can unmask a trick here."

With the same breath he added:

"I am a new one among you, but I think I can do something that will go far to prove that I am a solid man in this crowd."

"What are you a-driving at?" asked Towser, while the others, Rustle included, stared surprisedly at him.

"I mean that there is a detective in your midst at this moment. Is that plain?"

"A detective!" burst from all, while their faces paled somewhat at the announcement.

"Yes," and reaching suddenly and grasping Jack Ruby by the collar, he cried: "A detective and here, in the very man I am holding!"

It was a critical moment.

"Stand back there!" commanded Ellsworth, stepping to a position almost between the two, while Ensor held his gripe on the youth's collar.

"And who are you to tell me to stand back? I am even newer in this mystic circle than you are."

"Yes, and you are Michael Ensor, the murderer of Silas Armstrong! Loose your hold on that man's collar!"

The words were hissed into Ensor's ear not loud enough for the others to hear.

The effect seemed to plunge him into an ungovernable rage.

The saturnine orbs now assumed a fiery glare.

He wheeled upon the rest.

"My new comrades!" he cried. "I say there is a detective in our midst, and this is the one!" leveling his disengaged hand at the face of Ruby. "Probably the two are here to break up this little organization—I suspect it strongly. And to prove it, I will show you—"

He was interrupted by something that happened at a signal from the woman, Rustle.

Billy White-eye sprang forward, saying, gutturally:

"This 'ere's gone far enough!"

At the same time he presented a revolver at the head of Michael Ensor.

"What do you mean?" he growled, in half-rage and half-astonishment, as he forgot Ruby for an instant and glared upon the burglar who menaced him with a weapon.

"I'll tell you, Michael," answered Rustle, leaping forward. "I know that you have been pulling the wool over the eyes of my husband, Terry Towser. You have Silas Armstrong's money, and your coming here to-night was a blind by which you hoped to gain time and then slip him again, as you did after the murder of Silas Armstrong. But you can't fool me—"

"No sir-ree!" chimed in Towser. "You can't fool the old gal."

"And you've got to divide before you can ever get out of this place alive!" the woman shouted, as she herself drew a revolver.

CHAPTER XIII.

PIPING A FENCE AND FENCERS.

THE programme as arranged by Mother Rustle was being carried out by Billy White-eye, with the others "posted" but passive.

She meant to bring Michael to a terrible account for the money which she believed him to have—and this the money of the mysteriously murdered man, Silas Armstrong.

A thrilling tableau it was that formed for a second in that dully-lighted room in the back of the rookery.

Ensor still retained his gripe on the collar of the youth whom he had accused—though at random he it said—of being a detective; Ellsworth, with interposing hand outstretched between them, gazed at the ruffian who menaced Ensor with the gleaming revolver.

Ruby, appearing to be the coolest one in all that room, gazed steadfastly at the woman, Rustle.

The other two men were on their feet, waiting for further development, as Rustle said:

"You've got to divide before you get out of this place alive!"

"I've got nothing to divide!" shouted Ensor, in turn.

"You lie, Michael Ensor. You have the money you took from the bank after the murder of Silas Armstrong. Where is it?"

"That there's the talk!" chimed Towser again.

"Where's the ducats, old pal?—show 'em up, or your goose 's cooked, an' don't you fergit it, you bet!"

"I have no money. And now I see your little trick, Terry Towser. You did not believe me when I swore to you concerning Silas Armstrong's money; you brought me here for this purpose."

"You've got it down fine as a detective yourself."

"But I won't make the others here suffer for your betrayal and treachery. I've got my hand on a detective—and one of the worst that the thieves of Baltimore may find that they have to cope with before the thing is through with. Look at this youth. Are you blind? I said I thought I had seen him before. Him? Ha, ha, ha! what fools you are. The whole thing's put up. Why, this is a woman!"

And as he said this, he turned his gaze again upon the face of Ruby, while another, a terrible look came into his glowing orbs.

"A woman!" all exclaimed.

Billy White-eye lowered his weapon.

Rustle, however, was not to be tricked, if this was a trick on the part of the man she believed had Silas Armstrong's money.

Her weapon continued to steadily cover him.

Towser stepped forward and gave a more searching glance into the effeminate face than he had bestowed before.

"A woman, I say, and I shall expose her. One of the most-to-be-dreaded sleuths that is now working on the detective police force. Behold!"

As he said this, he laid his other hand on the mustache that graced the upper lip of Ruby.

But there was an intervening stroke from a fist that knocked the hand aside.

Ellsworth struck out straight from the shoulder.

Ensor, releasing his hold, staggered back with the blood oozing from his face.

"Hands off!" shouted the young man.

The rest of this gang that frequented the fence of Mother Rustle were now aroused, however.

"It's so! It's so!" shouted they all, in a chorus, and springing forward. "Off with that disguise! Of course it's a disguise!"

The next moment would have seen rough hands on the person of Jack Ruby had it not been for a startling occurrence which just then completely and remarkably altered the whole scene within the small room.

The apartment was in the back building.

Its walls were without any means of ascent or connection with the adjoining buildings on either side, excepting a short exterior stairway that led up from the yard after one might be admitted to the yard behind a high fence.

In the center of the room was a small skylight with thick but transparent glass.

But for the fact that Mother Rustle knew none of the neighbors could, because of the peculiar formation of the building, see anything that might transpire in the room under the skylight, she had never taken the pains to have the glass opening closed.

It was not over three feet square, and it was a great convenience in the daytime, for admitting light to the room.

Now it had admitted something else.

In the midst of the thrilling tableau that was transpiring, suddenly there was a crash of glass.

The whole frame and all the panes seemed to have been shivered downward by something forcibly striking upon it.

And instantaneously a human form came shooting downward.

A man had entered the apartment through the skylight, the broken glass falling and jingling around him as he came.

Around his head was wrapped a scarf, and he had his hands in his pockets.

But as he struck the floor, the hands came out of the pockets and the scarf was thrown from the face.

Mark Magic, the detective, in proper person, stood revealed, and in each hand he held a revolver.

It has been shown that Magic did not intend that the young amateur detective should do anything of which he was not to be aware.

Upon the return of the marshal to the city, he had obtained indefinite leave again.

Having previously spotted the abiding-place of the person calling himself Jack Ruby, he went thither—Reid's Hotel, by the way—and was much pleased to find his peculiar quarry was at the time in his room.

When night had fallen and Jack Ruby showed himself, the disguised sleuth was on hand and ready to follow his movements.

From that hour until midnight, he did not lose sight of Ruby for so much as an instant.

And a remarkable trail it was that led up on his following of the young amateur.

He was behind the two, Ruby and Ellsworth, when they entered the shop of Mother Rustle.

He waited outside a few moments and just as he was about to enter on a reconnoiter, a form came forward from the gloom, saying cautiously:

"Mr. Magic?"

"I guess you must be slightly mistaken—" but adding, as he recognized one who knew him in his many disguises:

"Is that you, Castor?"

"Yes."

It was the "shadow."

"What are you doing here? I told you to watch the house of Michael Ensor."

"And the watching has led me here."

"How?"

Castor related what had transpired at the house of Ensor—his sighting and shadowing of the burglar and the subsequent trail to the shop of the woman Mother Rustle.

"They are inside now—this man and Ensor?"

"Yes."

"And you heard every word of what you say you did?"

"Yes."

The shadow had communicated the significant conversation between Ensor and Towser in the room after the discovery of the latter in his burglarious pilgrimage.

There was a point here for the detective.

Ensor and Towser had talked about the murder of Silas Armstrong in a suspicious manner.

But just then the detective had something of unusual importance on his hands.

He knew that the criminal, William Ellsworth, had escaped from jail—ay, he had witnessed the escape!

But for a purpose, he did not wish to apprehend him immediately and cast him back again into the gloomy palace of cells.

He scribbled a few lines on a slip of paper and gave it to the man whom he had addressed as Castor.

"Take this to the marshal's office and leave it for him with the message that it is private and very important," he said. "Go you again to Ensor's house and be on the lookout. Have Rathburton relieve you by daylight. I have Ensor then under my own eyes, and I hardly think he will leave this place before morning."

The shadow departed.

Magic entered the shop.

He was the customer who engaged Mother Rustle and delayed the signal for which Towser was looking as he conversed with Ruby and Ellsworth in the upper room.

At the moment Magic entered, in a disguise that even the experienced eyes of Mother Rustle would not have penetrated as such, the girl, Kitty, was descending the stairs.

And again came that calling signal from the little gong that indicated the presence of some one at a door in the rear of the dingy building.

"Unless I'm most powerfully deceived," Magic thought, to himself, "this place is surely a fence. I have heard of Mother Rustle's place before; but it never struck me as it does at this moment, as being a fence. I shall investigate it at the same time I am looking out for my quarry—"

"What is it you wish, sir?" broke in the voice of Rustle, on his thoughts, as she presented herself before him at the counter, eying him searchingly.

"You buy things, don't you?" he inquired.

"Sometimes. What have you to sell?"

At the first sound of a step amid the screening mass of clothing, Ensor had drawn back a little further, until he was out of sight.

As the girl, Kitty, made a movement toward the rear, to answer the stroke at the gong, Rustle made a sign to her.

She turned and paused to whisper in Ensor's ear:

"She means for you to come with me. It isn't safe for you to be exposed here, if you are going to be one of us."

They vanished through the little narrow door.

"What have you to sell?" repeated Mother Rustle.

"I haven't anything along with me," replied the detective. "But I've a lot of stuff up to my living place, in the west end, and I'm on the lookout for a good place to get rid of it."

"What kind of stuff?"

"Well, some watches and a ring or two, besides a diamond-necklace—"

It was here that the voice of Towser called impatiently from the head of the stairs.

Rustle glided quickly away from the counter to respond.

Magic, with covertly roving eyes, had observed a little pile of what appeared to be silver forks and spoons beside a slicing apparatus, some cut in half and others not yet touched.

The pile was within arm's reach with a little extra effort.

He leaned dextrously and secured one of the pieces.

It was the handle portion of a spoon.

On the surface he had seen a monogram.

In a trice it was out of sight in his pocket.

"You'd better bring down your goods and let me see them," the woman said, returning to the counter.

"Will it be all right?" he queried.

"Certainly."

"No danger?"

She was silent for an instant, her hawkish eyes fixed straight upon his face.

Lowering her voice, she asked:

"Is there anything crooked about the things?" He made an uneasy movement.

"I didn't say there was," he replied, in the same guarded way.

"Then you just take them up the alley at the side, when you come—don't bring them in the shop at all. You'll see a pair of stairs against the wall, in the yard. Pull the bell at the top and you'll be attended to," significantly.

"All right."

Magic had satisfied himself that the place was a fence for stolen goods.

He left the shop.

But he did not go far.

Beside the shop was the alley mentioned by Rustle.

Into its almost impenetrable gloom he slipped quickly.

Here he removed his disguise.

Then he hurried noiselessly forward to the gate—through the gate and to the designated steps against the wall on the outside of the building.

Hardly had he reached the landing at the top of the rickety flight, and was pausing to consider what his next move should be, when he detected a movement on the other side of the door, as if some person was about to emerge.

CHAPTER XIV.

A WOMAN IN DISGUISE.

IN the supreme moment of an emergency, like that which was about to present, Mark Magic was a man who could think and act with an almost lightning-like quickness, and probably better than if given time to think over a course.

It was the result of long training in the school of peril.

So very low was the ceiling of this apartment in the back building, that the edge of the roof was but a few inches above the door frame.

With a sudden, athletic motion, Magic had grasped the edge of the flat roof and swung himself up over and out of sight.

Simultaneously the door opened, and Kitty Diamond said, to some one departing stealthily:

"It'll be all right when Mother Rustle weighs the silver. Be around to-morrow night and she'll have the money ready for you, you may be sure. Look out for cops, now, when you go through the alley."

There was no response, and Magic could hear the person descending the rickety stairway, while Kitty reclosed the door.

The detective glanced about him.

Not five feet distant there was a dull glimmer, coming from the roof itself.

Careful investigation disclosed the source of this to be a skylight; he was soon peering cautiously over its rim upon the scene in the room below.

It was at this juncture that Ruby and his disguised companion, under the leadership of Terry Towser, entered the presence of the crooks.

He watched.

Not a word came to his ears.

But by what he saw, he easily inferred that he had fallen thus accidentally upon a veritable crook's roost.

The faces of all there were the faces of rogues. He was a witness of the strange scene that followed almost immediately upon the entrance of Ruby and the other.

That he saw Ensor there was a satisfaction.

Then, when the thrilling tableau ensued, he started.

Nothing could he hear.

But he realized that this amateur—probably for some deep game having entered the nest—had been a little headlong and was then menaced with a terrible danger.

"The foolish fellow!" burst in an involuntary whisper from his lips. "He's green yet—these shrewd villains have penetrated his character, and Ensor is at the head of it. Ensor is one of the gang, I see."

Then came the drawing of the pistols.

At first they were leveled at Ensor.

In the next moment the weapons were lowered, and all were scowling upon the form of Ruby.

"I'll save him at all events," resolved Magic, who was somewhat vexed that the young man should thus have so recklessly run his head into a hornets' nest, as it were.

But how to aid the imperiled person?

The skylight was arranged solidly in the roof; there was no way to raise or otherwise open it.

Suddenly occurred that which, with the chattering exclamations of the crooks that came upward in an incoherent murmur, showed that Ensor was about to roughly handle the young man.

Not a moment was to be lost, if assistance was to be rendered.

A desperate expedient was resorted to in the one second the detective had to think.

He switched his coat tails up around his head, giving the tails a twist under his chin.

He rammed his hands deep into his pockets.

Then he leaped straight up into the air.

Thus with hands and face protected to some extent from possible cutting by the glass of the skylight, down he came, with a terrible crash!

Through frame and glass he went, like a shot. Down into the cramped apartment, into the midst of the men and the woman who formed the tableau there.

A more completely startled set of humans could not be imagined.

Instantly upon alighting on the floor, the coat tails were dashed aside, and the hands leaped from his pockets, each one armed with a gleaming revolver.

But before the scene could culminate in further startling action, two things happened which for a moment altered the whole aspect of affairs.

A loud scream burst from Mother Rustle.

Ensor uttered a curse.

The latter, at a blow with his fist, knocked the sputtering candle from the table, enveloping the room in total darkness.

Magic sprung forward, while around him sounded the clatter of running feet.

Then a door banged.

When he could strike a fuse, with which he was at all times supplied, the bold sleuth saw that, with one exception, he stood alone in the room.

The exception was Jack Ruby.

And the fuse revealed that the room was paneled with an extraordinarily clever perfectness, so that it was almost impossible to say in which way the recent occupants had gone.

Not the slightest sign of a doorway was there in any side.

"Come, you'd better be getting out of this," said Magic, touching Ruby on the arm.

The young man was standing as if petrified.

He trembled in every fiber from head to foot.

The detective had to almost pull him from the place.

When they had descended the outside stairs and entered the gloomy surroundings of Harrison street, Magic said:

"You're playing your little game too close, I'm afraid, young man. What took you in there?"

Ruby had recognized, in the first moment following the advent of the man through the skylight, the detective whom he had seen at the marshal's office.

His voice was unsteady, as he answered:

"You know my mission. I am searching for the murderer of Silas Armstrong."

"You expected to find him in there?"

"Yes. And I was not mistaken."

"What do you mean?"

"Both the murderer and the witness were in the room."

"Ah! And did you expect to capture them single-handed—such a pair as they must be?"

"No."

"They were about to handle you roughly as it was."

"They would have killed me—at least I am sure Ensor would."

"Did he have any other reason to do that than the discovery that you were, possibly, a police spy?"

"Yes."

"What reason?"

"He had penetrated my disguise."

"And so have I," said the detective, meaningly.

In the extreme moment of agitation, Ruby was not speaking with the same voice with which he had addressed Magic at the marshal's office.

The detective had made a discovery.

And Ruby started again, as he said:

"You are a woman!"

"Granted," was the prompt response.

"And you are working in the interest of William Ellsworth?"

"With all my soul and strength."

"What is he to you?"

"No matter—"

"And who are you?"

"You must not try to find that out. It can make no difference to you who I am. You have learned that I am a woman; you know that I have already accomplished something toward what I promised regarding proving Ellsworth's innocence. I have seen the murderer and the witness. Is not that a great way on the road?"

"It is. But you are a woman. You cannot carry out your plans unaided; you have but recently been near losing your life."

"I have one near me who will do battle in my cause if need be. I was not afraid in that room there. Michael Ensor would, in another second, have been hurled aside by one stronger and even as desperate as himself. No, I do not fear. And I beg that you will let me go on in my own way in this trail. I will come out all right in the end, and I will prove Ellsworth's innocence."

"Do as you please," said Magic. "Good-night. You would be doing wisely to get away from this vicinity, I think."

With which warning, he turned away, leaving Ruby standing alone in the gloom.

Our detective now sought the marshal's office.

As he went, he was thinking deeply over his discoveries.

Here was another female who seemed to be taking a wonderful interest in the criminal, Ellsworth.

Erminie, the crazy girl, had sent a written cipher to the prisoner.

Michael Ensor was "in" with the band of crooks who made the apparent fence of Mother Rustle their head-quarters.

And the amateur female detective had declared that she had already stood face to face with the murderer of Silas Armstrong and the witness to that murder.

Who were they?

For the present he could not further watch Ensor or the masquerading female.

As he entered the office, he found the marshal walking to and fro with a puzzled frown on his brow.

Instantly he said, pausing short before Magic.

"That was a strange message you sent in here a while ago. I have remained here waiting for you to come in and explain it; otherwise I would have been abed and asleep long ago."

The hastily scribbled note Magic had sent to the office by his trusty shadow, was lying on the desk.

The words it contained were:

"If the ticker brings any astounding intelligence from the jail regarding the man Ellsworth, do not be surprised, and do not let the news get around among the stations. Above all, keep the fact from the newspaper reporters. MAGIC."

"What in the world does it mean?" the marshal asked.

"That the criminal, Ellsworth, has escaped," replied Magic, very composedly.

"What! How do you know that?"

"I saw part of the little scheme of jail-breaking carried out," was the next announcement, that seemed to completely astound the official.

"And why do you want it kept so quiet? I think, if your suspicions are true—"

"Not suspicious, marshal, for I saw the man get out, and very slickly at that."

And he added, as his superior's face was a picture of amazement at the announcement and the coolness of Magic:

"If you will allow me, sir, I would like to say that I really want Ellsworth to be at large."

"What for?"

"Because we shall certainly get at the mystery of Silas Armstrong's murder quicker with him out of jail than in it."

"You talk as if you knew positively that Ellsworth was not the guilty man."

"Well, I have pretty strong reasons for asserting that he is not the guilty man. The trail you started me on has developed into a pretty big thing; and if you will just let me manage it in my own way, I will be responsible for the result. Ellsworth will not attempt to leave town; I am assured of that by what I myself saw this night, and not by anything that has been told to me. He is directly on the trail of the man who did kill Armstrong, and with him is one who has affirmed to me within the hour that he has stood face to face with the murderer, and a man who can prove absolutely that fact as a witness. But come, I would like that we visit the jail before the escape is discovered there and a hubbub created, and that we may warn the officials of our intentions and game to some extent. As we go, I will narrate some of my adventures since I first took up the shadow of the suspected man, Michael Ensor. It is leading up to considerable complication."

The marshal had utmost confidence in his subordinate as about the keenest on the force at that time.

Without delay a conveyance was summoned, and the two went with rattling wheels over the pave in the direction of the jail.

CHAPTER XV.

A KEY TO THE CIPHER.

BEFORE the great iron gate of the stone building at the falls the marshal drew rein.

Accompanied by Magic, they were admitted.

A brief conversation ensued in the lodge room at one side.

Then the three entered the building, ascending to the caged and stilly corridors.

Before the door of a certain grated cell, the man who led the way paused and unfastened the heavy lock.

A light was struck in the cell.

And their first and simultaneous glance into every corner and beneath the narrow cot, showed that the cell was empty.

A look of blank dismay was on the face of the warden.

"Hush!" said the marshal, as he saw that the other was on the point of uttering a loud exclamation.

"As I told you, I want this thing kept as quiet as the grave itself. It will facilitate our recapturing of the criminal. If there is a racket over it, it will make him all the more cautious when he gets wind of it by daylight. The fact of the escape must be a secret among the officers of the jail. I will be responsible in the matter. But there must be no talk about it outside these walls—at least for the present."

These words were spoken after an understanding between the marshal and Magic entered into during their hasty drive to the jail.

Magic had proceeded to make an examination of the cell.

The single iron bar at the narrow window—a bar that was not remarkably stout, though stout enough to have resisted any forcible attempt to displace it—was wrenched out at the top at a place a few inches below its upper imbedding in the masonry.

And still around it was the small leather appliance, cup-shape, in which had evidently been held a powerful acid which had made quick work in weakening the iron, so that a strong man might easily have rent the bar asunder.

Ellsworth could only have received the acid and the appliance of the leather cup from one person.

No one had been permitted to visit the prisoner, without the presence of a watchful deputy warden, excepting the detective, Mark Magic, and the recent visitor, Jack Ruby.

The search of Ruby's person for any possible goods of a contraband nature had evidently been conducted with an awkward haste, as this occurrence proved.

Attached to the lower portion of the displaced bar was a knotted end of an improvised rope.

The prisoner had ripped his clothing into lengths and then plaited and spliced the lengths together.

He had been permitted to retain his trunk in his cell, which contained an extensive wardrobe.

To have made the rope to reach from the window to the ground must have required a long time, and the work must have been done in the still hours of the night, in total darkness.

But it was done and done thoroughly.

"But he must be still within the walls. He couldn't possibly scale the wall!" exclaimed the deputy, with a pale face.

Magic and the marshal knew, however, that the criminal had scaled the wall at a certain point, where he had assistance on the outside.

Another rope, with a stone attached to its end, had been thrown over the wall.

The party outside had made it fast to the base of a sapling growing at the curb on Madison street.

Again had Jack Ruby facilitated the escape of the prisoner.

From the top of the wall to the pave was a high jump.

But liberty was the object, and Ellsworth unhesitatingly took the leap, alighting safely and making off in the darkness, supplied with a heavy screening slouch hat which Ruby held ready for him.

This part Magic had witnessed.

It was as he followed close upon the trail of the escaped criminal and the one who had so admirably assisted him, that he was brought to the fence of Mother Rustle.

While mentally collecting all the details of the escape, it occurred to Magic that he had given a certain promise to the criminal at the time he visited him.

Perhaps Ellsworth knew then that he was about to effect his liberty, and there might be a written message in the cell for the girl, Erminie, who had so unaccountably evinced an interest in the supposed murderer.

He glanced beneath the cot and more carefully in the corners.

Here he found nothing.

But as he turned over the small, hard pillow on the cot, a tiny bit of paper met his eyes.

On the paper were some letters of the alphabet.

At first he attached no importance to the find, and was on the point of permitting it to drop to the floor.

But in the same instant his alert brain caught at an idea.

He placed the paper in his pocket.

"What was it you picked up from the bed?" questioned the marshal, as they went driving along the street and across the bridge again, after leaving the jail, where all the officers therein were instructed in regard to the official's desire of secrecy to aid in the recapture of the criminal.

"A piece of paper."

"What like?"

"Like a key, possibly, to some cipher," replied Magic, significantly.

"Of what use is it?"

"When we get to the office, I shall probably find that out."

"I am worn out. I want some sleep, and it is getting well along into the morning now—"

"Please give me a little of your time at the office," requested Magic. "I think I have found something valuable."

At the office, Magic turned on the gas-jet to its full capacity and produced the little slip of paper he had found beneath the pillow of the cot.

The letters it contained were simply these:

A	B	C	D	E
F	G	H	I	J
K	L	M	N	O
P	Q	R	S	T
U	V	W	X	Y.

"Pah!" broke from the marshal. "That is something like the scribble of the crazy girl that you showed me."

Magic glanced at his chief peculiarly.

"I think you have hit pretty close to the head of the nail," he said, with a nod.

"How? I don't comprehend your meaning."

"This has some connection with the cipher given me by Erminie Ensor the other night."

"Pshaw! what do you imagine there can be between that young lady and the criminal?"

"Perhaps a great deal. If this shall prove a key to the cipher written by her, it shows that they must have had a secret between them of no short standing. There is but one young lady in the world—that is, I suspect as much—who would be so very intimate with Ellsworth as to have a private mode of correspondence, or at least who might find it necessary to carry on a correspondence with him in cipher."

"Who is that?"

"The young lady who was his sweetheart. I have learned that Agate Armstrong, daughter of the murdered man, and Ellsworth, were lovers, and that old Armstrong was bitterly opposed to his courtship. The two, then, may have had a cipher to correspond with, in order to conceal their affectionate utterances from the father, in the event of the letters being discovered and appropriated—"

"I take but little stock in the theory."

But Magic had argued very reasonably, he knew, notwithstanding his professed incredulity.

"Take the alphabet, if you please, while I read from the cipher," Magic said.

"But how do you imagine you can untangle it, even supposing it to be a key? It may consume the balance of the night."

"I think otherwise. I have already formed an idea of how to read it. Oblige me."

And as the marshal drew out his pencil and seated himself before a sheet of paper at his desk, Magic began to read from the cipher which he still retained:

"2-3 1-1—"

"Stop!" interrupted the official. "What am I to do?"

Magic's eyes twinkled. He bent over the other's shoulder.

"The first is 2-3," he said.

"Yes, and that is so much Greek."

"Suppose we take the letter L."

"What for?"

"Because it is the second letter in the third column."

"L," said the marshal, writing it down.

"Now then, 1-1, the letter A because it is the first letter in the first column," and as he proceeded thus, with 2-3 1-1 5-2 1-5 1-4 2-4 4-4—

But here the marshal interrupted.

"That's making all bosh," was his impatient exclamation.

The letters as wrought were:

L-A-J-U-P-Q-T.

Magic was not in the least discouraged.

"If you desire, I will not detain you, sir," he said. "I can work it out alone, I think. I had hoped, however, to convince you that I was not wrong in my surmise."

"Go ahead. I'll remain and help you, since you are sanguine in this matter."

The declaration pleased Magic.

"Now, then, we will suppose that the right-hand column was intended to be taken for the first column—that is, the E column."

"Well?"

But the result of of another reading of the numbers was as below:

N-E-F-Y-T-S-P.

"Might as well give it up," said the marshal, with a sleepy yawn and drowsy eyes.

"We have but commenced," rejoined the indefatigable detective.

"Go on, then."

Magic was silent for a few seconds.

He was studying the diagram crosswise.

But he saw that his idea of counting could not be applied to the letters in this way, as only the two main diagonal lines through the center would measure five letters, and the fifth occurred frequently with a precedent.

"Go on," repeated the marshal.

"We will now count from side to side," Magic said, slowly and thoughtfully. "Beginning at the left and slightly altering our plan of procedure, we have the letter L, because it is the second figure in the third row."

"All right, I see."

Then the detective read off as rapidly as the others could jot down the letters under the new trial.

This came out:

L-A-V-U-P-Q-S.

The marshal was disgusted by this time.

Not so with Magic.

"We will reverse the manner again, sir, if you please."

His keen eyes were devouring, as it were, the cipher and the supposed key alternately.

"Proceed."

"Put down H because it is the second row, third figure."

"All right."

"Now, A because it is the first row, first figure—1-1. And now V because it is fifth row, second figure, 5-2."

He had read the first four off, when the marshal looked up, saying:

"There's a word, anyhow."

"What is it?"

"Have."

"Then we're on the track. This key means that the first figure designates the row and the second means the letter. Now mark as I read off," said the elated detective.

The reading:

2-3 1-1 5-2 1-5 1-4 2-4 4-4 1-3 3-5 5-2 1-5 4-3 1-5
1-4 4-5 2-3 1-5 3-3 5-1 4-3 1-4 1-5 4-3 1-5 4-3 1-3
2-3 1-5 1-5 4-3 5-1 4-1 5-3 2-4 3-2 2-4 1-1 3-3 4-5
2-3 1-5 4-3 1-5 1-1 3-2 3-3 5-1 4-3 1-4 1-5 4-3 1-5 4-3."

The solution:

"Have discovered the murderer. Cheer up, William! the real murderer!"

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DILEMMA OF BILLY BARLOW.

"WELL, and now that we have it, what does it amount to?"

The marshal looked up as he uttered the inquiring words.

The result did not seem to impress him at all.

"A great deal to me, sir."

"In what way?"

"It bears out my theory. Young lovers, where there is an objection to the courtship on the part of the parent, frequently resort to a cipher mode of writing to one another."

"Well?"

"There was an objection on the part of Silas Armstrong to the attention paid to his daughter by William Ellsworth."

"Well?" again from the marshal.

"Erminie Ensor is Agate Armstrong."

Still the incredulous look on the superior's face.

Magic continued:

"And Agate Armstrong was the one witness who, Ellsworth said, could give testimony in his behalf that would go far toward proving his innocence."

"You believe that Erminie Ensor is Agate Armstrong?"

"I intend to conduct my operations on that supposition."

"But the supposed criminal?"

"He and Erminie Armstrong are at this moment together. I discovered to-night that the man who gave his name as John Ruby was a woman—the party I told you of as having received from me the permission to use a detective's badge. I do not believe that Erminie Ensor is in an asylum. I believe that John Ruby is that girl, playing a bold game for the benefit of her innocent lover. Innocent lover, because she has said this night that she had stood face to face with the real murderer and a witness to prove the fact."

Once more the marshal yawned.

"Magic, you are a very obstinate and successful detective. I think you know what you are driving at."

"I do."

"Go on with your game then. I'm tired."

As he said this, he arose and took up his hat.

The night clerk just then entered, coming from the coffee-house.

"I'm going to take a little nap," Magic said to the clerk. "I want you to be astir at the first glimmer of dawn."

"All right, sir."

Magic dropped into an easy-chair, shading his eyes with his hat and in a few minutes falling into a slumber.

The touch of the clerk's hand aroused him.

Through the long windows was then creeping the first gray of the coming daylight.

He had been asleep not more than an hour and a half.

He left the agency after bathing his face, which, with the short nap, was all that the indefatigable sleuth required.

At a livery stable he secured a saddled horse.

And as he rode toward south Baltimore, he was attired in his disguise as Doctor Bayne Bramble.

He was making for the private asylum of Doctor Billy Barlow.

Arrived at his destination, he pulled the bell-knob at the main gate without alighting.

A sleepy porter responded.

"I want to see the physician in charge here," he announced, with a professional dignity.

"Why, the Lor' bless me, sir, it's hardly daylight, an' the doctor don't get up till about eight—"

"There, there, that will do, my man. I want to see Doctor Barlow, and at once. Summon him, if you please, or open the gate and allow me to go to the house."

"Wait a minute, sir."

The gate-keeper went to a telephone box at one side, and sounded the alarm for the house.

Considerably to his own surprise there was a prompt answer.

"Hello, down there! What the dogs is the matter at this hour, eh—what is it?"

"A gentleman for to see you, sir," responded the gate-keeper.

"Too early—can't see him. Tell him to come after awhile—at reasonable hours, do you hear?"

The response was communicated to the disguised detective.

"Tell Doctor Barlow that one of the doctors who reported on the case of the young lady, Erminie Ensor, has called and must see him at once, or there will be some trouble."

The tone in which the instruction was delivered was authoritative, and the man turned to the telephone again.

The answer came back in a different manner.

"Open the gate. I will see him."

A few seconds later and Magic was riding along the graveled path toward the house.

Doctor Barlow was on the porch.

"Good-morning," he saluted. "A rather early hour for a call—yes, rather early. Walk into the parlor, please. Um!" and he made one of his customarily almost servile obeisances as the detective hitched his horse to a post and ascended the porch.

"You are Doctor Barlow?"

"Yes. My name. Surprised to see you so early, Doctor Bramble."

"I have called on important business."

"Walk in."

He led the way to the reception-parlor.

Hardly waiting to take a chair which Barlow pushed forward, Magic said, after handing his card:

"You have a young lady here by the name of Erminie Ensor."

"Ahem!—yes. That is, there was a young lady brought here by her uncle and aunt, and if I am not mistaken, one of the certificates—which I of course required before her admittance—was signed by you—hey?—was it not?"

"Yes. I was one of the physicians who examined into the young lady's case. A very sad case."

"Oh, very—very," hurriedly indorsed Barlow, with his nervously twitching motion of body and hands.

"I desire to see the young lady," said the detective. "That is the reason of my early call—so that it may transpire before my regular hours for attending to patients."

For a second Barlow was silent and staring.

Then, with some emphasis:

"Heh! Impossible! Can't be done, sir—no, not at present."

"Why not, pray?"

"Simply because the young lady—and greatly to my surprise, considering that her relatives said she was at all times perfectly tractable—has become somewhat unmanageable, and we have been compelled to confine her a little rudely."

"No matter, I must see her."

At this Barlow actually puffed.

"And I say it is out of the question. Now, my dear doctor," in a slightly whining voice, "you must be reasonable. I understand my business, sir, perfectly—oh, yes! And I assure you that there are reasons why you cannot now see the young lady. Some other time—some other day. Why, it would be positively indelicate for me to show her to you, to say nothing of the rule of my establishment forbidding such a thing while a patient is under treatment for a case like hers—"

"You refuse to admit me to an audience with her?" demanded Magic, while his eyes flashed a little.

He was about to use his authority as an officer of the law.

But as the doctor proceeded with another explanatory outburst, protesting and declining the favor asked, another idea struck the detective.

"Very well," he said, with forced quietness, "I am sorry, for if I had been able to see the young lady herself, perhaps I could have saved you from some very unpleasant developments regarding her case."

"Heh! What do you mean?"

Barlow was more nervous than ever at this latent hint of some trouble in store.

"I will be plain with you, Doctor Barlow. And I will say, now, that I would not see the young lady if you were to offer to lead me direct to her. There is something wrong with this affair, and it is already being discussed by the authorities as to whether you, the physician in charge of this asylum, have not connived at her incarceration, knowing that she is no more crazy than you or I."

The physician's florid face suddenly became of a sickly hue.

If there was anything that he feared it was that the authorities might take a step toward investigating the interior management of his lunatic asylum.

There were several reasons for this dread—the principal one being because of the confinement of the mysterious man with the white hair and beard mentioned in a former chapter.

"Why, bless my soul!" he exclaimed, with astonishment and indignation, the one genuine, and the other well assumed. "Not crazy! What in the world—But that settles it. Yes, sir. I won't be brought into trouble on her account, or anybody else's account, you may depend on that—"

"I bid you good-day," said Magic, politely, and he walked from the house.

Barlow would have then and there invited the doctor to see the young girl, had such a thing been possible.

But he believed that his new and beautiful patient had been drowned through her own act in the river near by.

He made no objection to the departure of the supposed Doctor Eayne Bramble; he was indeed anxious to have him begone.

When Magic was seen to ride out at the gate, Barlow called his henchman, Sam, with some excitement.

"Sam!" he cried, or rather spluttered; "the jig's up!"

"I heerd the whole racket, Doc," said Sam, knowingly. "Yes, I take it there's no use in your tryin' to play that leetle game onto the uncle an' aunt o' the girl. You'd best hurry up to town an' see 'em afore they leave the city, an' tell 'em all about the suicide."

"That's my resolution, Sam. Yes, I'll be off at once. It will be far better for me to make a clean breast to them in regard to the young lady than to wait until she is demanded of me at the hands of the law. Oh! I'm not going to get into any mess with the authorities if I can help it, you may depend on that."

"Well, no—I reckon not," agreed Sam, dryly.

The doctor's gig was ordered around hastily.

Within fifteen minutes Barlow was whipping the animal forward to the long bridge.

As the wheels rumbled onto the heavy plank-ing of the bridge, a horseman appeared, coming leisurely around from behind a sheltering rise of ground near the beach.

Magic!

"I thought that would do the business. I imagine that this old rogue, Barlow—and he is certainly a rogue, if faces do not lie—does not want the authorities poking around among his patients."

He dismounted at a short distance from the great gate to the grounds of the asylum.

In his proper person he approached the gate-keeper, who just then came forth to take a glance along the road, as if after his hastily departing employer.

Magic, as shown, did not believe that the young girl Erminie was in the asylum at all, or if she had been, she had effected her escape.

For, that the young man who gave his name as Ruby was the girl, he was almost thoroughly convinced in his own mind.

He was determined to satisfy himself on that point, however.

"Good-morning," he saluted to the lodge-keeper, in a voice that was not now disguised.

"Mornin' to you, sir."

"I am going up to the house, my man. You need not make any fuss about it. I have business there—"

"But the doctor's out, sir."

"No fuss, I say. Look here. Can you read?"

He displayed the badge as he spoke, and the staring individual, already considerably astonished at what he supposed to be a great quantity of assurance on the part of this second early visitor at the asylum, read the word: Detective.

With a patronizing smile, Magic passed the gaping man and went toward the building.

As he ascended the porch, he heard the voices of men coming apparently from around one of the angles of the house.

The voice said:

"You kin bet it's me, Sam Flack. Oh! I'm a Wanderin' Jew an' a boss-team to let, I am. Now, as I said, you kin just take your choice: Come into this leetle game o' mine against the doctor, Billy Barlow, an' share what you an' me kin make together, or stay out in the cold; an' the next thing I'll do will be to send the detectives here for to gobble in the man whose name is Silas Armstrong—I will, an' don't fergit it!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A REMARKABLE TURN IN THE TRAIL.

THE voice belonged to no other than Terry Towser.

The fellow must have gained access to the premises by scaling the high wall.

And by the manner of his address to Sam, it appeared that the two were old acquaintances.

"I tell you I daren't do it, Terry. I daren't. There'd be the very de'il's own time to pay if the Doc foun' 'at I'd played him any such trick as that there—"

"Then you're standin' in your own light, that's all, an' you ain't got the spunk of a rat. Wot's the use of you a-playin' off this-a-way, when I tell you 'at I'm boun' for to bring the police here an' get the man out anyhow? I'm a-makin' you a offer wot will bring in ducats, it will—"

"But I don't see it," demurred Sam, stoutly. "How came you to know 'at the man was Silas Armstrong what was supposed to be killed down toward Bladensburg? An' how do you know that he's got any money hid away at all?"

"Look a-here, Sammy, my bright duke o' genius, I'll tell you how I know. I knew the face o' old Silas as well as I knew the specs o' my grandmother. I thought, too, 'at he must a-been murdered—but he wasn't, you see. He was put into the coffin all right, but the coffin

was put into the vault an' ain't never been buried in the ground to this day, an' I kin swear to it. Silas didn't choose to stay into his coffin, mind; he up stakes an' crawled out an' snaked it over into this here part o' the country, where he fell down in the road right before the gate o' this here place. He was taken suddenly sick an' mighty bad, I reckon, fer if he hadn't been took in by the Doc, old Billy Barlow, he might 'a' died right there. Barlow, he took him in an' I reckon has kinder hitched onto his tork about the money wot's hid away somewhere, an' he's keepin' him here till he gives in an' tells where it is. Now, when he finds that there thing out, he won't have no more use fer the old man, an'—why—well, you an' me knows, Sam, 'at old Barlow ain't a over religious sort of a chap, he ain't, an' he'll just quiet like get the old man out o' his way, that's what he'll do, an' you kin bet safe onto it. I saw him when he took the old man in, I did. I was prowlin' round fer a chance to make a raise out o' this very buildin', never dreamin' 'at it was kep' by my old employer, Barlow, an' the moment I see him get Silas inter his clutches, I knowed then that he wouldn't ever let him go if he once got a scent o' the hidden money. But the man you've got hid away in some o' the cages is Silas Armstrong fer sure, an' if you'll just let me manage it, I kin make us both pretty well off, understand, an' you kin light out an' not care a picayune wot Barlow thinks about it—"

"Come on, then, Terry. We'll go up an' see the man. If he'll trade, all right. I guess my old woman'll be agreed to it."

"An' have you got the old woman along with you still?"

"Oh, yes. She an' me keeps it up all right. Though she is a little free with them muscly arms o' hern sometimes. Come on."

The two were approaching the front of the house.

Noiselessly Magic stepped inside and secreted himself behind the door that opened into the side parlor.

Terry and Sam ascended the stairs.

Magic believed that he had stumbled upon a wonderful revelation gained from the conversation between the pair.

Could it really be that Silas Armstrong was not buried, that he had not been killed at all, that he had escaped from his coffin in the vault where it had been placed temporarily, and had strayed into that vicinity to become a prisoner in the house of Doctor Barlow?

It was almost too astounding to be credible.

"Surely there is some mistake in this thing," he muttered, as he peeped forth after the receding forms. "But I'll know more about it before I leave this building."

He issued forth and followed at a safe distance after the couple whose voices were still audible coming from the upper floor whither Sam had led his old acquaintance.

In the corridor above, the two men encountered Sam's wife.

"Why, Terry Towser, that ain't you, is it?" she exclaimed, in a coarse-toned salutation.

"Me, every time, ma'am. How d'ye do?"

And while they were shaking hands, Sam proceeded to explain to his wife a plan concocted by Towser for the release of the old man with the white beard, who was no other than the man, Silas Armstrong, who was thought to have been murdered mysteriously on the Bladensburg road.

"Terry, here, says 'at he's got a powerful lot o' money hid away somewhere, an' maybe, if we agree to get him loose from old Doctor Barlow, he'll come down handsome."

The woman's eyes glittered avariciously.

"An' what's to hinder, if that's so?" she exclaimed. "Here we are a-workin' for the man, Doctor Barlow, for little more'n our wittles, we are. I say, if Terry ain't wrong about this, why let's do it. I'm agreed."

"I thought she'd agree," remarked Sam, who had entertained no doubt on that point, when his wife should learn that there was probable money to be made out of it.

"We'll have to skip out mighty lively, though," he advised, with a significant nod.

"Of course, an' who cares," rejoined she. "I'm ready to go without stoppin' even for a carpet sack, if we're to make a big pile of money out of this."

The faces of several of the poor wretches who were confined in the rows of cells with the grated doors, appeared as they conversed; but they paid these no heed, though one or two uttered an occasional dismal howl while glaring forth.

"Come on," said Mrs. Flack, swaggering like a man in disguise off along the corridor.

At a girdle she carried a bunch of keys, and selecting one of these, she unlocked the furthest door at the end of the passage where there was but little light.

The three entered the room.

At first they could only indistinctly see a prostrate form on the bare floor.

But as Terry's eyes became accustomed to the surrounding gloom, he discerned that form was a man who was confined and rendered helpless in a somewhat remarkable and barbarous manner.

The man was flat upon his back, with face upturned.

His limbs were slightly forced apart and encircled by clasps that were of stout iron and riveted down into the floor.

His arms were slightly spread away and downward from his body, and around each wrist was another band secured to the floor in the same manner as the anklets.

The contrivance was something like the stocks used for fractious mules during the operation of shoeing.

Then Towser observed that the man had a firm gag in his mouth, rendering him utterly incapable of making any outcry.

Beneath the head of the unfortunate prisoner Mrs. Flack had, in a possible and transient impulse of pity, placed a small pillow to protect his skull from the cruel hardness of the rough flooring.

"We have to keep him this way," said Sam, "or he'd be raising the very Old Ned on the premises all the time."

"Well, it air rather rough," admitted Towser, as he stood and viewed the helpless man.

Suddenly the man began to struggle in his bondage.

Not much of a struggle and of course futile; but he jerked his wrists and limbs in the cutting clasps till they seemed about to start from their fastenings, and the violent exertion effected enough noise to be heard, through the open door, by the other lunatics in their respective cells.

Instantly there was a universal howling and screeching.

The sound did not affect Towser any more than it did these two, man and wife, who were Barlow's assistants.

"Say, you," Sam addressed the victim on the floor, "here's a visitor what says he'll make it pay us to set you free—or you can do that if you will. Now, if I take that gag outen your mouth, will you be quiet like an' tork business with the gent an' me, say? You kin nod your head, can't you, if you're agreed?"

The man nodded rapidly, and into his glaring orbs there came a look that the others thought was a great gleam of hope.

Sam removed the gag.

"Now, then, what'll you give if we set you scot free?"

"Money! I'll give you money! Nobody knows where it is but me—nobody. I want to be free. I want to get these claws of mine around the throat of the man who has kept me here, chained and fettered like a mad-dog in its kennel. Oh, I want to kill him—tear him to pieces—"

"Hush up that, now," commanded Sam, gruffly. "None o' that. I ain't a-goin' for to let you off to kill people, I ain't, an' have their blood onto my hands."

"Course not," supplemented Towser, emphatically.

Mrs. Flack closed the door, which had been altered since the previous narrow attempt at escape on the part of the prisoner.

The whole door, in fact, had been removed, and one substituted that had no grating, but was supplied with a small slide through which a wary glance could be taken to see whether it would be safe to enter the cell.

The closing of the door completely shut out the sound of their voices from the other insane people in the corridor, who were now beginning their customary uproar upon hearing the voices of their two keepers.

"Afore we go any further," said Sam, "take a good look at him, an' make sure 'at he's the man you think he is."

"Oh, there ain't no mistake at all. I know him well enough, I do. It's Silas Armstrong—"

Notwithstanding the warning he had received from his keeper, the prisoner here uttered an interrupting cry to the words of Towser that was positively curdling to the veins.

An awful sound, like a shriek, which penetrated their ears cuttingly, half-deafeningly.

Instantly the gripe of Sam was on his throat, choking back the prolonged scream, his brawny hands pressing almost savagely on the wind-pipe.

"Ef you do that there again, I'll choke the life out o' you!" he gnashed. "Will you be quiet, or shall I put the gag back again into your loud mouth, say?"

The wretch made a motion that was understood to signify that he would not repeat his outcry.

But something in Towser's utterance had seemed to thrill him in such a way that the noise he made had come almost involuntarily from his mouth.

"Now, then, about this here thing o' settin' you free?"

The man was in a tremble.

But with a voice more quiet than Sam had heard him use since being cast into the cell by Barlow, he said:

"I'll make you a rich man—and you—and you," looking at Sam, Towser and the woman alternately.

"How much 'll you give?"

"I'll give to each a thousand dollars—"

"Pooh! burst disdainfully from Towser.

Sam and his wife gazed inquiringly at him.

To their ears a thousand dollars seemed to be a very fair offer.

"What's the matter with that? I'm satisfied," Sam said.

"Oh, I ain't satisfied at all, I ain't. I want a heap more'n that, I do, an' don't you fergit it," declared Towser.

Then he addressed the prisoner.

"Look a-here. Silas Armstrong"—and Towser observed that a shudder passed over the man at utterance of that name—"I know 'at you had a money belt round your waist, you had, when you was knocked in the head by the man 'at I know did the thing. In the belt was ten thousand dollars. I wants half o' that pile, or none, an' if you don't agree to give us that much, why, here you'll stay, I reckon, till the old Doc gets tired an' tosses your carcass into the river. Now I'm a-preachin', I am, an' what do you say?"

"You think my name is Silas Armstrong?"

The man was strangely quiet.

"Of course I do, an' I know it. You've changed some in these few months, but I know you allee sance, as the China feller says."

"You are right about the money. Silas Armstrong did have a money belt around his waist at the time he was attacked on the road. It had ten thousand dollars in it. I am the only living person in the world who knows where it is hidden. I will do as you demand; I will pay over to you half the amount if you will give me my liberty."

"Where's the money at?"

A cunning gleam came into the other's orbs. He shook his hoary head from side to side.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SPOILING THE SCHEME OF A CROOK.

THIS motion of the prisoner's head from side to side was as much as to say:

"No you don't! I am not to be fooled in any such manner as that. If I tell you where I have hidden the money, I might whistle in vain for my liberty!"

And it is just barely possible that exactly such an idea simultaneously pervaded the minds of the three avaricious beings who were thus striving to ascertain where was hidden the money of Silas Armstrong.

But Towser said, very coolly:

"You won't tell, eh?"

"Do you take me for a fool? I shall keep my lips sealed until I am free; then I will give you the share I promise."

"Oh, but that 'ere won't work at all, you know," declared Towser, forcibly. "We let you free, an' then we might be blowed fer our money. I'm up to a thing or two, I am."

"I will make a proposition, then," said the man, with his gleaming orbs fixed upon the trio piercingly.

"Well, wot 'ave you got to say?"

"The money is not far from here."

"Fur from this 'ere asylum, do you mean?"

"That's what I mean."

The three exchanged glances.

"You liberate me, and I will go with you to the spot, where we can divide the money. If you do not agree to that, I shall never open my lips about it more; it can lay there and rot. I will take my chances of getting out of this infernal charnel-house of living dead men. That's all I have to say."

Towser deliberated.

He was perfectly satisfied that this man was Silas Armstrong.

He believed that Armstrong had buried his money.

Perhaps the proposition made with such earnestness was the best manner of terms that could be attained.

"What d'ye say, Sam?"

"I'm agreed, I am."

"So'm I," chimed the stout, brawny-armed wife of the keeper.

"Will you swear that there ain't a-goin' for to be no trick about this? You'll lead us to the spot—"

"One of the spots, yes."

"What air you meanin' by that?"

The man indulged in a chuckling, half mocking laugh.

"There are two spots where I have hidden the money," he said, cunningly. "In each I have placed five thousand. I will take you to one of the places; you can dig up your share. Then I will leave you and procure mine when it is safe to do so without being pounced upon by you and rebbed and killed. You go your way with your share and I will go mine before I get my own share. I shall not be afraid of your keeping me when I have done my part, for I am a match for the whole of you," and they realized, as they carefully surveyed the muscular arms of the prisoner, that it would be a highly dangerous experiment to attack him openly—a course that still lingered contemplatively in Towser's mind; for the treacherous burglar wanted the whole of the amount for which he was bartering.

Now, as he took that closer survey of the muscles and marked the transient waves of demonish light that shot athwart the almost insanely lighted orbs, he was thinking of another thing.

It might be possible that the fellow, once free, would himself become the attacking party, and in such an event, it was a question whether their own lives would not be jeopardized.

"I shall not trick you," said the man, as if he read Towser's latest thought with those tigerish and penetrating orbs of his. "Act squarely by me, and you shall have and keep the money. I want to be free—that's all. I do not mind the price for my freedom. Come, get off these fetters."

"Shall we risk it, Sam?"

"It's about the best we kin do, I take it, if we want the money at all."

"That's my idee," indorsed Mrs. Flack.

"Let him loose, then, an' we'll be a-movin' afore the Doc gets back. It wouldn't be healthy fer him to find us at this 'ere leetle job."

As Sam produced a patent key from his pocket and stooped over the fetters, the prisoner, gazing

straight at his keeper, seemed under a terrible strain in the effort to control his self.

Liberty appeared to be at hand at last.

Was Towser wrong in supposing the man to be Armstrong?—and the poor wretch had only permitted the deception ay, aided in keeping it up, in the one great hope of deliverance from the mad-house of Doctor Barlow?

This question did not for a moment enter the mind of the scheming burglar.

But before the key could be inserted in the intricate lock of one of the ankle fetters, there was a startling interruption.

"Hold!" said a stern voice. "I have a little word to say here!"

The door was pushed open behind them, and a form stepped into their midst.

Mark Magic, the detective, had listened to the entire conversation; the time had now arrived, he thought, for some decided action on his part.

As he stepped into the cell, he had both revolvers out and cocked, ready for action.

The three plotters started back with white faces, more alarmed, probably, than if this unlooked-for intruder had been Doctor Barlow himself.

From the lips of Towser burst a half-suppressed oath that was dire and deep.

He recognized, in the man-hunter, the same party who had adventured through the skylight at the fence of Mother Rustle.

He believed him then to be a detective.

"Just postpone it a little, I'm proceeding for the present. That man must not be released," he said, coolly.

"Why, Lor' save us! an' who might you be?" demanded Mrs. Flack, who was the first to recover from the general surprise.

"I am Mark Magic, of the city police detective force. And I want that man," pointing to Towser.

"Me? You want me? Why, there, now, wot 'ave I been doin'?"

"That is something I intend to find out. For the present"—as he transferred both pistols to one hand and with the other produced a pair of handcuffs—"I will just put these little ornaments on you, friend Towser."

"You're a-goin' for to handcuff me!" in dismay cried the burglar, as he saw the familiar bracelets which no doubt had at other times been clasped around his wrists.

"That is precisely it—"

"I won't submit—I won't! I ain't been doing nothink, I ain't, an' you ain't got no warrant fer me, I know!"

"Here is my warrant," said the detective, sternly, and leveling a revolver. "If you offer any resistance to having the darbies placed on you, I shall shoot you down exactly where you stand. Is that plain? You know, I guess, that a detective doesn't stop to fool long with a desperate criminal."

"An' who said I was a criminal?" protested Towser, his baleful eyes red with pent-up fury and a combined feeling of fight.

Magic addressed Sam Flack in a tone that was not to be disregarded, saying:

"Take these handcuffs, sir, and click them on the wrists of your friend Towser. Do it right and thoroughly. And if you hesitate one minute, and if he dares to resist, down you both go. I'll shoot you both, as sure as my name is Magic!"

"Do it, Sam—do it," urged Mrs. Flack, who had a wholesome dread of detectives.

And Sam, at the words of his wife, stepped forward to do as he was ordered.

Towser knew better than to resist with that threat hovering over him that meant death; but he hissed into the ear of the keeper, as the handcuffs clicked tightly:

"I'll be even with you fer this, Sam, cuss me if I don't!" and there was murder in his look as he uttered the words.

Retaining one revolver in hand to guard against a concerted attack from Towser and his friends, Magic advanced and giped the burglar by the collar.

"Now, come, we'll get out of this. Lock the cell carefully, Sam," he said to the keeper, with a meaningful accent. "I do not want that crazy fellow inside there to escape until I come to take him out myself. I want to speak a little further with you, Sam. Come along, all, and do not attempt any underhand dodge, or I'll bore all three of you so full of holes that it will actually spoil your clothes."

At this juncture, as they were passing from the cell, the man on the floor, realizing fully that the prospect of his liberty was suddenly gone, gave vent to such a curdling yelp and roar combined, that it seemed to people the air of the corridor with a terrific hint of demons broken loose from another world.

The sound was taken up by the other insane inmates of the cells, and pandemonium in miniature reigned for awhile as the party of four progressed.

As they went, Magic demanded of Sam:

"Where is the beautiful young lady who was brought here a day or two ago? What cell is she in? Lead me to it."

"There ain't no beautiful young lady here at all," asserted Sam; and his wife said:

"I'm the only woman about the place, sir, an' that I swear to. If you don't believe me you kin look in every cell an' room in the building—"

"But there was a young lady brought here by parties representing themselves as her uncle and aunt. Now, there is no use in your equivocating. I know such to be the fact, and I want to see her. It will be better for you if you show me where she is at once. For the authorities are investigating in regard to her and you and your wife may get into some trouble if you are in any way, in conjunction with Doctor Barlow, attempting to conceal her—"

The man and wife had exchanged glances; and the latter said:

"Why don't you just tell him all about it, Sam? I would. I take it we've no call to be uneasy with what we've done; we was only obeyin' orders here, an' we ain't responsible, we ain't, for what Doctor Barlow does."

"You see, sir," spoke up Sam, scratching his head at a spasmodic jerk, "there was a young lady brought here, an' don't you forget about it, she ain't sufferin' for want o' pluck. I can tell you. I was left with her in the garding for awhile, an' Lor' bless me! she just out with a revolver an' made me open the

gate, an' out she walked. Me an' the Doc looked for her after a bit, an' we foun' her hat an' shawl by the side o' the river, an' a note, too, what said as how she was tired o' livin' a-cose she was crazy, an' good-by, an' the like. That's the truth, sir, I swear it, an' the Doc'll say the same, an' if I die for it, an' if you drag me inter jail I couldn't say no otherwise, that's fer a fact."

"Yes, that's the truth," indorsed Mrs. Flack.

And the keen sleuth saw that the pair spoke truthfully, if he was right in his aptness at reading the human countenance.

Upon the brow of Towser there had come a thunder-black frown.

He knew that Michael Ensor had confined the girl in the asylum. If the girl had exhibited enough pluck to make the keeper, at the pistol's point, give her her liberty, she was plucky enough for anything almost. Michael Ensor, at the den of Mother Rustle, had started to expose in their midst a female whom he charged with being a police spy. There were reasons why, Towser knew, the girl might wish to pipe down Michael Ensor and even himself, and perhaps it was she who so boldly entered the back room at the fence, accompanied by the criminal who had so recently broken jail, William Ellsworth—an innocent man, as Towser knew, confined for the murder of Silas Armstrong.

Magic was convinced that Flack and his wife were speaking truthfully in regard to the girl.

More easily convinced, because he had all along believed that Erminie was not in the asylum.

But he did not think for a moment that she had committed suicide, as the indications had led Barlow and his assistant to suppose was the case.

Turning to the pair on the front porch, he said, warningly:

"Whatever has transpired here this morning, keep it dark from the doctor, or I shall put you into more hot water than you may dream of. There is something crooked going on, as you can infer; if you want to keep out of it, mark my words well."

"All right, sir," they agreed jointly and promptly.

"An' what air you a-goin' for to do with me?" demanded the frowning Towser.

"You? Oh, you will right about face and—forward march!" pointing off along the path to the great gate.

CHAPTER XIX.

REVEALING A TRUE IDENTITY.

When the detective reached his horse at the spot where he had hitched the animal at the side of the road, he compelled Towser to trudge along on foot ahead of him toward the city.

He knew from words dropped by the disguised girl who was so boldly playing the part of a detective in the interest of Ellsworth, that she wanted a certain witness to prove that she was right in her suspicion as to who had really killed Armstrong.

As he listened to the dialogue between the trio and the prisoner at the insane asylum, he had heard Towser say that he, Towser, knew who it was that knocked the old man in the head on the Bladensburg road.

He instantly surmised that here was, then, the witness wanted by the party calling himself, or herself, Jack Ruby.

Though he did not believe that other portion of the conversation in the cell which seemed to point in such a remarkable manner to the prisoner there as Silas Armstrong resurrected, he intended to satisfy himself thoroughly on the point speedily.

"Say, this 'ere's a tough job, this walkin' business," remarked Towser, gruffly, as he tramped along ahead of the riding detective over the bridge. "A rather high-handed proceedin', anyhow. I'm a-thinkin'. You know I ain't been a-doin' nothink."

"We'll see about that," rejoined Magic, composedly. "I will have a few very important questions to ask you, Towser, when I get you safely behind the bars."

"An' how did you git my name down so fine, if it ain't askin' too much?"

"Oh, I've known you a long time. Prominent individuals like you cannot long conceal their identity, you know—"

"You're a-guyin' me, you are," as he half-turned and noted the grim smile on the face of the rider.

"Not a bit of it, Towser, old man. I've just been aching to find you ever since the night old Armstrong was killed—"

"Armstrong wasn't killed!" broke in the burglar, though something in the detective's words caused him a slight thrill.

"Oh, yes, he was—killed dead enough."

"Well, so I've heard."

"And so you know, I guess."

"What air you a-drivin' at?"

"I am driving just as hard as I can on the trail of the man—the only man in the world—who knows who it was that struck the blow that killed Silas Armstrong!"

From the crown of his head to the soles of his feet Towser felt something like an electric shock.

But he concealed it admirably, clinching his teeth and keeping his vitiated face averted as he walked perhaps a little more briskly ahead of the horseman.

And his baleful eyes began to roam around him, as if seeking some possible avenue of escape from this captor who was taking him into the iron grasp of the jaws of law.

He became suddenly and determinedly silent, notwithstanding Magic tried several artifices to draw further speeches from him.

"I ain't much on the tork, an' I don't know w'ot you're a-drivin' at when you get onto that 'ere subject," he said, with a blunt sullenness, in reply to some question from the detective.

Magic brought his captive straight to the southern station.

After a brief conversation with the captain, Towser was committed to one of the cages and left there.

Magic proceeded to the office of the marshal.

That official was not in.

Our detective went to the telegraph instrument and sent a message flying over the wires to the police authorities of Washington City.

The words of the message were:

"Silas Armstrong, killed some months ago and placed in the vault at Congressional Cemetery. A

murder case. Man named Ellsworth, tried over here at his own desire. Must know at once whether said body is still in the coffin—in coffin—in the vault, and if buried, exhume in a case that is life or death. Oblige by report of examination.

"POLICE MARSHAL,
Baltimore, Md.

"Headquarters Detective Police,
July —th, 1894."

Hardly had this message been finished, when into the office came the young amateur, Jack Ruby.

Ruby had learned the name of the sleuth.

"Mr. Magic," he said, at once, "I am a little thrown off the scent I had started by my adventure last night."

"Ah?" inquiringly.

"The man whom I wanted to secure as a witness, has disappeared since last night, and neither I nor my friend can get on his track."

"You mean the man known as Terry Towser?"

"The same. But how did you learn his name?"

"We have a way of finding out those things," said Magic.

And before Ruby could speak further, he added:

"I think you are acting a little at sea without having thought how necessary it was in a case of this intricate character—particularly as it is to involve the life or death of your lover—to consult the experience of those whose lifelong business it has been to unearth just such matters as you have attempted to work out unaided."

"What do you mean?" asked Ruby, a little hush-edly, and with a slight start.

"Is not Ellsworth your lover?"

"Who have you decided that I must be?"

"Erminie Ensor."

"My name is not Erminie Ensor."

"Magic looked at the disguised girl keenly.

"Are you quite sure of that?"

"I will solemnly swear it if you require."

"And yet, who but a girl who loves a man with all her heart would do and dare for a criminal what you have done and dared?"

"What have I done?"

"I'll tell you what you have done," and Magic proceeded to tell her that he knew all that had transpired in regard to Ellsworth's escape.

"You see, you never asked how it happened that I was so opportunely on hand to aid you at the moment when Michael Ensor in the thieves' den on Harrison street, would have done you an injury—"

"He would probably have killed me if he had succeeded in fully exposing me and satisfying himself that I was the girl he suspected me to be."

"Why has he cause to fear you alive?"

Ruby hesitated for a second.

Then she said, gazing frankly into Magic's face:

"When I tell you that my name is not Erminie Ensor, I speak the truth. And yet, I am the girl you saw at Michael Ensor's house when you came there disguised as a doctor—"

"Hla! How do you know that?"

"You think that I, like a great many other girls, am but a frail creature. You are mistaken. I have, I think, more nerve than the average of my sex. I have for many months acted the part of a crazy girl in the house of the man who professed to be my uncle, and under constant surveillance of a woman who was even more brutal than he was. You would not guess who I really am, I am sure."

His eyes twinkled.

"I think I can guess."

"I defy you," banteringly.

"You are Agate Armstrong."

The assertion was an evident and complete surprise to the disguised girl.

"You are right. But how could you have ever discovered it?"

"By this."

As he spoke, the detective produced the cipher which had been thrust into his hand by the supposed crazy girl on the occasion of his first visit to the house of Ensor.

"How could you discover anything by that?"

"I'll tell you."

And when he had replaced the slip in his pocket, he continued:

"First tell me how you know that I was one of the physicians who came to examine you?"

"I knew it the first time I met you in this office. You have not cut your nails since—indeed," and the disguised girl smiled—"indeed, I hardly imagine you have taken time to even clean the nails since that night. You had then a stain under one nail, as if from some red ink. You will observe that the same stain, on the left thumb, is still there."

This was true.

With all his experience, and though he had himself detected criminals on far less evidence of identity than this, he was disposed now more than ever to consider this girl a very remarkable person.

"I have decided," continued Ruby—as we shall for the present call the girl—"to tell you my whole story. Your hint of a moment ago has impressed me with the fact that I can accomplish more with your aid than alone. But first tell me how you detected that I was Agate Armstrong—for I am she?"

"I have read your communication to the prisoner, Ellsworth, which you gave to me."

"How was it possible?"

In a few minutes Magic had made it clear to her that he had indeed mastered the key to the cipher, which, by its actual simplicity, had at first promised to be of such an intricate composition.

"But how would that give you an idea that I was Agate Armstrong?" he queried.

"I do not object to tell you," said Magic, smiling.

"I have deduced, from the fact that Silas Armstrong objected to the attentions of William Ellsworth to his daughter, that the lovers had a secret mode of correspondence. From the moment of your giving into my hand the cipher, I suspected that there was something of an intimacy between you and the supposed murderer of your father. I have worked it down to the present shape, as you see. It is not necessary for me to go into further detail."

"No, it is not. And now, I meant to tell you my story of that affair."

"You were with your father when he was murdered?"

"Yes. We had left Bladensburg—our farm was a short distance from the farm of a man named Staf-

ford, who is well known in that section. I was with my father. I sat on a chair in the wagon. He was driving. When we had gotten almost to our own ground, suddenly a man jumped from the side of the road and attacked my father before he could make any resistance whatever. I saw my father fall. At the time, the first thought that caused the impulse of my after action, was to save myself from a similar fate—a fate that I supposed meant death, for my father had a money-belt around his waist with not less than ten thousand dollars in it. I slipped out the back of the wagon during the noise of the struggle, though it did not last more than half a minute. I made off and gained shelter at the side of the road, amid the trees, and for a time I hid my face in my hands, so terrified was I. You will smile, I know, when I admit this much, and now seeing me in such a role as I am playing. When I next ventured to look about me, I could see, in the road, a man bending over the form of my father, as if to make sure that he was dead. Presently a second man came forward showing that there were two who had plotted to murder my father. As this last came up, the one who was bending over the motionless form of my father said:

"Here's the body, Terry Towser, but no money!"

"The last comer seemed to be a very much disappointed man at this remark, and his exact words I cannot remember now. But I had learned the name was Terry Towser. I do not think that the man named Terry Towser was a direct doer of the deed; he must have been an accomplice. The other man's name I did not hear. It did not transpire while the two were together. After a while, the man named Towser departed, and I heard the other man say: 'The sooner we make ourselves scarce around here, the better, for we might be suspected of the deed and nothing to show for it after all!'

"They separated. I waited a long time and then ventured forth to take a look at my murdered father. But it seemed that the other man who had been there—the one who had been bending over the dead body and who addressed the second comer as Towser—had not left. Ah, he must have known that I was near and watching. Hardly had I reached my dead father's side when I was grasped and forcibly borne away, while a hand over my mouth prevented my making any outcry. The man who did this, and who has held me a prisoner ever since, was—"

CHAPTER XX.

A VERY QUIET CAPTURE.

At this point in the conversation between the detective and the disguised girl, the marshal entered the office.

After a salute, Magic said to Ruby:

"Step this way with me, please."

They entered an alcove at one side of the handsomely finished apartment.

"Now, then," he said, when they were seated again, "the man who abducted you was—"

"Michael Ensor."

"So I have thought."

"Why have you thought so?"

"No matter; proceed with your story. But wait a moment," as he arose and went to the door.

Here he addressed the marshal in a low tone.

Ruby heard the superior official say:

"All right, Mr. Magic."

The detective returned to his seat.

In that one brief minute Magic had acquainted his chief with the fact of his having telegraphed to Washington in regard to the body of Silas Armstrong, in the vault at the cemetery in that city.

"Now, Mr. Ruby," with a particular inflection on the name, "who was it that abducted you?"

"I told you that it was Michael Ensor. But I did not know that until I recovered from a state of continuous swooning that came upon me after the deed that robbed my father of his life. I was brought by Michael Ensor to Baltimore on the midnight Express. I was in such a state that I hardly knew what I was doing, and I believe that he must have forced some kind of a drug into my throat before taking me with him, else I would not have gone so easily. He brought me to Baltimore. He took me to a house on St. Paul street—as I have since learned was the name of the street where was the house occupied by him. There I became a very prisoner. When I was permitted to recover my senses wholly, I learned that I was a prisoner. I heard something in the tone of Michael Ensor's voice that reminded me of the voice of the man who had bent over the form of my dead father in the road from Bladensburg. Instantly an idea entered my head. I resolved to liberate myself in a somewhat novel manner, as you will admit. I determined to impress them with the fact that I was in reality driven crazy by what I thought I knew. I simulated insanity to the best of my ability—"

"And I must say you succeeded admirably," admitted Magic, as he listened to this story of a girl who was the daughter of the murdered man.

"The result of my act you have witnessed almost to date. I succeeded in having myself placed in an asylum. Michael Ensor forgot that I could be a witness against him—and that I might be, was the cause of his having taken me in that manner from the roadside to keep me in confinement—and was completely deceived. I was consigned to an asylum on the other side of a river close to this city. From that I escaped. But I am going too fast. I must tell you how I know that Michael Ensor killed my father—"

"You know this?"

"I have the best reason in the world for saying that I know it. I have heard from Michael Ensor's own lips sufficient to convince me that he was the man who killed my father, Silas Armstrong; and I know that the witness must be the man named Terry Towser."

"Well, what did you hear?"

"I heard him say to the woman who is his wife, Rebecca Ensor, on an occasion when they thought that I was asleep in my own room:

"I wish that Silas Armstrong had never been killed!"

"And you had no business being mixed up in it, unless you knew better what you were doing than you did," she replied.

"Well, it's done now," said he; "and what's the use in slobbering over it? If Terry Towser will only keep away from us, and not tumble across the fact that we have the girl, we may get along all right. I

think she is crazy about what she has seen, and we may get her into the asylum yet, if we only play it right.

"From the moment I heard that," pursued Ruby, "I knew that Ensor had killed my father. He was the man I saw bending over my father's body in the road. I assumed more positive symptoms of insanity than ever. I was at last submitted to the examination of the physicians. Though what manner of doctors they could have been I cannot imagine. They must have discovered, if they had conducted anything like an honest investigation, that I was not insane. They seemed to take everything that you said as Gospel. You were playing your game to get me into the asylum."

"My dear girl, that was exactly my object, and I intended to visit you there and get what I could from you. I became interested in the case from the moment you gave me the cipher."

"But now we are all at sea, as I at first said. The man who is to be, under the plan I propose, a witness against Ensor, and that is the man named Terry Towser, is gone, and goodness knows only where."

"Will you please answer a question for me?" said Magic, somewhat abruptly.

"Certainly."

"Where is William Ellsworth?"

"You do not want to have him cast back into prison?"

"It may be necessary. But you need have no fears, now that we are so far on the true trail, as you feel so confident. Tell me where he is."

For a moment only Ruby hesitated.

It was her love—he was free!

Then, to show that she was honest in her belief that she could prove Ellsworth's innocence if required, she said:

"I will tell you where he is, if you will promise to aid me with all your power to secure the man who is, I believe, the true murderer, and who would have been taken prisoner in the first place if he had not confined me as a prisoner?"

"You are the one, then, who uttered the cries of murder from the house on St. Paul street?"

"Yes. And that occurred when the woman, Rebecca Ensor—who is, as I told you, more brutal even than Ensor himself—started to use a terrible whip upon me. I feared that from the passion of such moments she might eventually do worse, and so cried 'Murder' to frighten her. I have reason to think that the cry was heard upon the street."

"It was," said Magic.

And he continued, adhering to his former question:

"Where is the man, William Ellsworth?"

"Quite by an accident," replied Ruby, "I came upon the den of Mother Rustle, on Harrison street. I had Mr. Ellsworth with me; I meant to assist him out of town while I pursued my investigation on the knowledge I had gained that Michael Ensor had killed my father. Quite by accident, too, we met that man, Terry Towser, there, who inadvertently gave away his name. I at once resolved that we would join the thieves' gang at the den, in which Towser seemed to be a presiding genius, next to the woman Rustle herself. This I consummated. We are now, to all intents and purposes, members in good standing with her. Mr. Ellsworth is there now. We feared for him to come forth, in view of the fact that a great deal would be made over his escape from jail. Much to my surprise, however, the papers this morning do not say anything about it."

"No," rejoined the detective; "I have arranged that with the marshal and the other officials. But I am sorry to have to say one thing."

"What is it?"

"Your lover must go back to jail."

"No!" exclaimed the girl, in a startled way.

"Not after that I have revealed to you and all that I know we can prove if we can once get on the track of the man, Towser?"

"We are already on his track."

"Ah, I am glad of that."

"I have him now in the southern station, locked up."

"You have arrested him?"

"That is it."

"But you must have some discoveries of your own to warrant the haste in this—"

"Very naturally," he half interrupted. "In short, I think it will be an easy matter to corner Michael Ensor, now that we have a witness whom I myself have heard say that he knew the man who knocked your father in the head on the Bladensburg road."

A hopeful light came into Ruby's eyes.

"You heard him say that?"

"Yes. And now, I repeat: your lover must go back to jail."

"Why should that be necessary?"

"Because," said Magic, very gravely, "whatever my sympathies and beliefs are, I am an officer of the law, and I know that Ellsworth is as yet an escaped criminal merely. I will tell you that I have not the least doubt of our being able to establish his innocence with the clues we have found. But that does not alter the present fact that he is still a criminal, and I would be failing in my duty if I allowed him to continue at large."

After a second's thought, Ruby said:

"I am so sure of his eventual freedom, that I incline to think you are right."

"And it must be done as quietly and secretly as was his escape," Magic added. "I want him to go back there—and he can take my assurance with him that he will soon be a free and honored man, as far as he has been concerned in this Armstrong affair. Now, I do not want to figure much around Mother Rustle's place at present; I am going to close in on her suddenly and soon—when the whole of the gang, probably, is in the establishment. Do you go and bring the young man here. I know you will do this after what I have said. Bring him in disguise. I will have a conveyance in waiting and we will drive together to the jail."

"I will do as you request."

Ruby departed on his errand.

When he saw Ellsworth he did not find it so easy a matter as he had divined to persuade a man to go and give himself up in the hour of absolute liberty to the authorities who had held him under a sentence of death, as it were.

But the counsel of the loving and brave girl prevailed.

In a short time the two, Ruby and Ellsworth, entered the office of the marshal, where Magic awaited them.

"You have acted wisely," said the detective. "You will not regret it. Come."

A hack was outside.

Within half an hour the prisoner was again in his lonely cell, but with far different feelings than those which had possessed him a few days before.

The assurances of the detective and the girl he so dearly loved were a wonderful buoy to his heart now; he thought he could see the day not far ahead when he could stand forth and clasp her to his breast in the presence of the whole world, and she need not blush for him.

Innocence and consciousness of a pure girl's abiding love made the new cell to which he was consigned seem bright and cheerful.

As the two, Ruby and the detective, were being driven back toward the city hall, Magic said:

"You seem to be a girl of rare pluck, I shall ask your aid in another matter I have resolved upon."

"I am ready for anything that may tend toward the liberation of Mr. Ellsworth," was the prompt reply.

"I dislike to send a woman into danger. But I have a great deal of confidence in your nerve, which, I must say, is above the average of females. I want you to continue at the den of Mother Rustle. You may gather information to materially aid me when the time comes for me to swoop down upon that interesting haven of crooks."

"I will do so."

"You had better get out here, then," he said, as they came to a corner.

Ruby alighted and proceeded toward the junk clothing store.

When Magic entered the office, he was met by his superior.

"What about the escaped criminal?" at once asked the marshal, in a worried way.

"He is returned to jail. I have just come from there, after taking him. I would like the matter to continue quiet; keep it away from the newspapers."

The marshal appeared to be much relieved at this.

Just then a man entered.

Castor, the shadow who was employed by Magic to watch Ensor's house.

CHAPTER XXI.

FORCING A CONFESSION.

Knowing that his man must have something to communicate, Magic made a sign and the two stepped out to the pavement.

"Well, what is it?" the detective interrogated.

"Michael Ensor has not yet returned to his house. The woman there—his wife, I guess—seems to be somewhat anxious about his absence, for she is almost all the time looking out at the window upstairs, as if watching for him."

"Anything else?"

"A party has just been there—came in a private barouche—who seemed to be in a deuce of a hurry. A sort of doctor-like looking man. When he found that Ensor was not at home, he entered all the same, and stayed in conversation with the woman for nearly half an hour. When he departed and she came to the door with him, the faces of both looked as if they were terribly worried about something."

"Anything else?"

"That's about all. I have left another man up there to watch while I stepped around for some dinner and to see you."

"Have you had your dinner?"

"Yes."

"Return to your post then. Ensor is not to be permitted to leave town. If he attempts it, arrest him and bring him in. He is wanted pretty badly just about now; but I am not quite ready to close in on him."

Castor departed.

The detective called a hack and ordered the driver to go at good speed to the southern station.

Arrived here, he sought the cell which contained Towser.

The burglar was having a comparatively good time of it.

He had not been put back on any particular charge; was only known to be a prisoner of the detective's.

Towser had succeeded in procuring for himself a pitcher of beer and a package of cigarettes.

He had money enough for the limited luxuries, thanks to the liberality of the woman, Rustle.

"You are taking it pretty easy," said Magic, as he entered and was locked in with the man.

"Oh, I reckon I ain't no slouch. I ain't a-goin' for to be a-cryin' 'cause I'm fired back into a station cell, I ain't. Have a smoke?" and he very nonchalantly offered the package of cigarettes to the detective.

As nonchalantly as himself, Magic took one of the tasty fumes and lighted it.

"Now then," he said, seating himself, "since we are to have quite a confidential little talk to ourselves, we might as well do it sociably."

"O' course," assented Towser, shifting so that the other could take a seat near on the hard bench.

Magic puffed forth two or three tremendous rings of smoke—much to Towser's admiration—and then said:

"Now, my bird, we might as well get right down to rock bottom without any formality. I have come here to give you your choice. You can turn state's evidence and probably save your neck—though you will of course be severely punished, probably by life imprisonment—or you can just keep your artistic mouth entirely shut and go to the scaffold with Michael Ensor."

This was putting it rather abruptly even for the equanimity of the hardened burglar.

Despite himself, he started visibly; though he said, with a fair attempt at composure:

"Why, w'ot air you a-talkin' about, say? W'ot am I a-goin' to any scaffold fur?"

"For the murder of Silas Armstrong."

Towser's coarse face paled.

His yellow teeth closed down biting on the end of his cigarette, and he almost glared at the cool speaker.

"I didn't murder Silas Armstrong, did I?"

"Either you or Michael Ensor did. Come, now, you might as well give it out all straight. I've got you close, old man; there isn't the merest possible chance of a loop-hole for you. I have been hot and in dead earnest on this trail. It is only a question as to who will turn state's evidence first, you or Ensor. Whoever does come out first will share less badly. We've got Ensor in a tight hole, I must tell you. And now you know what I am here for, what are you going to do about it?"

The detective's keen eyes were on Towser's face as steadily as the watching orbs of a terrier.

"Hev you got Ensor bagged?" he asked, in a voice half-subdued, half-gasping.

Magic nodded slowly.

Towser was silent.

He seemed to want time for reflection.

Dread—that terrible dread which enters the hearts of criminals when they find themselves at last and inevitably confronted by the gallows—crept into his callous heart.

He moved uneasily on his seat.

"Why," he blurted, "w'ot makes you think 'at I had anything to do with that job?"

"I heard you say that you knew the man who knocked Silas Armstrong in the head. Now, if you did not do it yourself, which may be the true state of the case after all, you were at least an accomplice. You had best come right out with it. Give me a straight story, and if it turns out that you have spoken the truth about it, it may lighten your punishment—"

"But say, look a-herel!"

"Well?"

"Silas Armstrong ain't dead at all. How kin you hang a man when there ain't been no murder?"

"Oh, that trick won't work, my friend. You mean the man over in the asylum? That is no more Silas Armstrong than I am."

"But I say he is, an' I'm ready to swear it, and he'll tell you so himself, he will."

Apt reader of character as he was, Magic saw that Towser made this assertion in a spirit of absolute sincerity.

He really believed that the strange personage confined at Barlow's asylum was Silas Armstrong, and that Silas Armstrong had never been killed at all.

And the detective was himself a little perplexed by this item in the trail.

He had, however, taken steps to set the matter right one way or the other, at least partially so, as his telegram to the Washington authorities indicated.

It was not his intention though, to let Towser imagine that he gave the slightest credence to the supposition of the fact that the man in the asylum could be Silas Armstrong.

"There is no use," he said, very seriously, "in your tryin' to work off anything like that on me. I am a detective who knows his business, and I know that Silas Armstrong is at this minute tight fast in his coffin at the Congressional Cemetery, in Washington. Do you think I would leave that matter unsettled and be off on the trail I have followed all the time. Oh, no, my friend, I do not do business in that way."

Towser scratched his half-unkept head.

"This 'ere's rough!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, it isn't a bit rough. Everything is smooth sailing. I've got you down fine; Ensor is in a trap. We are going to find out who really did kill Silas Armstrong. If you are both silent after all I have got out of my investigations, why the probability is that we'll hang you both. A sort of dual execution, you see, and the exculpation of the young man who was sent up for the crime on mistaken evidence—"

"You detectives just beat the dogs, you do!"

"Come, I have but little time to spare now," said Magic, as he tossed the stump of the cigarette on the stone floor. "What are you going to do? Will you save yourself to a degree, or go along with Ensor. And my word for it, you are both heading straight for the scaffold—"

"Hol' on," broke in Towser, as the detective arose with a motion as if about to take his departure.

Magic re-seated himself.

"I'll tell you all about it," Towser added, somewhat doggedly.

"Go ahead then," returned Magic, in a tone as if he had all along expected this very occurrence.

"Mike Ensor did it."

"Michael Ensor killed Silas Armstrong?"

"Yes, he did."

"Well, go ahead with the particulars."

Towser eyed the persistent sleuth sideways, as if what he was about to say was dragged from his mouth against his will and by means of grappling-hooks.

"You see, it was this-a-way. Me an' Mike knew that old Armstrong had a money-belt around his waist. No matter how we found it out—that 'ere's a part of our business, me an' Mike's, to find out such things. Well, we made up our minds that we was a-goin' for to have that money-belt. Armstrong was a-goin' to his home outside o' Bladensburg, in the waggin w'ot he allus drove. When he left the town, we missed sight o' him, an' didn't know which road he took—the roads was two, an' they came together at a fork into one, just before arrivin' at about his place. So me an' Mike starts off. We took a short cut 'at would bring us purty near the forks, an' Mike he cut acrost to one fork an' I staid at t'other. Armstrong was boun' fer to come by one o' the forks. We made it up that whichever one sighted him first that was the one fer to knock him over. We fixed fer a signal by whistlin' onto the fingers, to tell which one had done the job. Then I waited at the side of the road. It wasn't more'n a hundred feet acrost from my ambush an' Mike's."

"After somethin' like a hour, I heard the signal from Mike. I hoofed it over in a hurry an' found Mike a-bendin' over the dead body o' the old man. The first words he said to me was: 'There ain't no money here, Terry.' 'W'ot?' says I. An' then, when we searched the body all over, sure enough, there wasn't no money to be found. I didn't suspicion that Mike'd be so tricky as to take the money an' then pour that 'ere racket into me ears, I didn't. Well, we hitched the horse an' waggin to a tree an' seppyrated. Mike, he went one way an' I went another. I ain't never laid eyes onto him until t'other night, when I come acrost him in this city."

I had seen a friend of mine, meantime, and she told me that Mike had tricked me; he'd gone to the bank almost before the dead body was found and drawn the money on a forged check and a forged note from the dead man, saying something 'bout a goin' out West.

"But I tumbled across another thing, meantime. When I was a trampin' it to Baltimore, called over by this 'ere friend o' mine, I come across the 'sylum' o' old Billy Barlow. I used for to work with Barlow when he kept a place down to Washington. I seen Barlow take in a man from the roadside. An' that man, I kin swear, was Silas Armstrong come to life ag'in! I poked around like till I learned that the man war sick an' delirious an' kept talkin' about some money he had hid away. That settled it. I knew the man war Armstrong; an' the cunnin' old Doc wanted for to find out where the money was. I then made up a leetle game o' my own. For I had learnt that my friend was wrong 'bout Ensor havin' the money. Ensor didn't have it. The man at the 'sylum had it, an' that man war Armstrong himself, you see. Then I made to do what I was a-doin' when you kinder dropped in an' spoilt the whole thing. Now you've got it, an' there ain't no more to tell."

"Was not Agate Armstrong with her father at the time he was murdered?"

"She was into Bladensburg with the old man that day. But I didn't see nothink of her at the time me an' Mike was a-lookin' at the man Mike'd killed. I was too excited, like, an' Mike, he was makin' a big an' loud fuss about not findin' the money."

"You've told me all there is to tell?"

"So help me Bob! There's the whole thing. An' now if you'll jest take as much trouble to find out about the man over to the asylum, wot you have to bag me an' Mike, you'll find 'at he's Silas Armstrong, an' that we didn't kill Armstrong at all."

The fellow had spoken in a very straight and convincing manner. Magic arose at the conclusion of the confession.

Leaving Towser still in durance vile, he departed from the station.

His first act was to communicate with Castor, the shadow.

He sent the shadow a note, saying:

"The moment you see Ensor, arrest him. Quietly if you can, forcibly if you must. I will have the warrant ready."

"MAGIC."

He was now satisfied that Michael Ensor was the real murderer of Silas Armstrong. The confession of the accomplice, if wholly true, fixed the guilt indisputably.

At the marshal's office a telegram was waiting for him.

The Washington authorities had been heard from even more promptly than Magic had expected.

And even as he was reading the telegram, another message was brought in for him. It was from Ruby, and contained exciting intelligence.

CHAPTER XXII.

JACK RUBY IN DANGER.

JACK RUBY was incurring more personal danger than, perhaps, that individual himself (or herself) thought, in thus boldly returning to the "fence."

Michael Ensor had probably penetrated her disguise.

His act on the previous night showed this much.

Ruby knew that Ensor would not hesitate to kill him if he discovered beyond doubt who this newcomer was at the fence.

The fact of Agate Armstrong having so cleverly hoodwinked him for an apparent object of getting out of his clutches, and her appearance there in disguise, would at once give him the suspicion that she had played the whole desperate game with the intention of hunting him down for the murder of her father.

Ensor knew that Agate had heard that conversation between himself and his wife which so strongly pointed toward him as the murderer of the old man.

But while the girl was supposed to be insane, he had not apprehended any danger to himself through this fact.

Where was Michael Ensor?

Ruby had not seen that personage since the moment when he had dashed out the candle-light on the remarkable advent of the detective through the skylight.

Ruby presumed that he had returned to his home on St. Paul street; frightened, no doubt, by the close presence of a noted detective sleuth, whom he probably had recognized.

In this she was wrong.

Ensor was doing exactly the opposite thing.

Alarmed at the occurrence which showed him that if his suspicion was correct regarding the disguised girl, she also had others near who were either shadowing him or about to close down upon the night-bird band that made its rendezvous at the junk clothing store, he had concealed himself on the premises, with the admirable aid of Mother Rustle.

He was in an underground apartment that few besides herself knew anything about.

The reservoir into which poured all the booty which was brought to her at times by the band who were to a great extent under her shrewd control.

Down among the conglomeration of valuables he was, not shinking or like a hunted man, but supplied with various comforts, prominent among which was a great flagon of ale and a box of cigars.

Mother Rustle had made arrangements with the girl, Kitty Diamond, to attend to the secreted man.

She too sniffed danger in the air, and unknown to any of her crooked associates, was making preparations to depart from the place at an early day.

Ensor was not to enjoy his retreat without doing some work, however, in payment therefor.

At one side was a ponderous melting machine.

In the caldron, as it were, he was engaged in melting a mass of silver composed of sheared spoons and forks and other articles of value.

And an old hand at it he must have been, for he proceeded in an experienced manner, occasionally taking from earthen molds the shining stuff and arranging it in glittering rows on a shelf under the brilliant lamplight.

When Kitty brought his supper down to him, he asked:

"Is it night yet?"

"Yes.—My! you've been busy down here, haven't you?" as her glance fell upon the silver molds on the shelf.

"What time is it?" questioned Ensor, in his short, gruff way.

"Past nine o'clock."

"Has Mother Rustle come yet?"

"Not yet. She don't hardly ever get around before after ten o'clock, she don't."

"Is that young snipe in the house yet?" he pursued, while stirring the solid mass of melted silver, and occasionally taking out a blackened crust.

"Who? You mean the young fellow who came here, and was joined into the band by Mother Rustle?"

"Ycs, that's the one."

"Oh, he's been up in the back room the best part of the day. He's a bully fellow, you bet," declared Kitty, with evident liking for the handsome young man. "He knows a thing or two, I tell you. I shouldn't be surprised he'll make the best cracksmen in the lot, after he once gets started. I'm going to have him for a beau."

Ensor glanced at her peculiarly.

He judged by this that nothing had been said by the members of the band regarding his assertion that Ensor was a woman in disguise, and no doubt one of the female police spies with which the authorities of Baltimore sometimes scented out the criminal haunts of that city.

"When Mother Rustle comes, tell her I've nearly done this job down here, and I want to speak with her. Bring me some more beer," he added, as the girl turned to ascend the secret stairs.

Kitty took the pitcher and departed.

A few minutes later and Ensor retired from his task at the silvery caldron.

"That's done," he said to himself. "I made a good thing of it with Rustle when I bargained to do the work for one-fourth. I will get a good pile—twenty of these balls of silver. Each ball weighs not less than six ounces, and silver is worth ninety cents an ounce. Then, there are the meltings from the gold rings and watch-cases. I get twenty of those balls," as his eyes wandered to another pile of golden balls, which had been also melted and shaped by him during the day. "Not a ball there weighs less than three ounces, and gold is worth seventy cents per pennyweight. I think Mother Rustle is about to pull out. I did well in striking her on this racket before I myself cleared out. I am getting nervous, somehow. I feel as if something was hanging over my head. Bah! what can scare me? Why, if the worst comes, I know I didn't kill Silas Armstrong. If I could only account for it, I wouldn't care. But assure as I am taken in—and if ever Terry Towser should blow, I'm a goner. Well, so is he. I have no fear that he will give the thing away. What am I talking about? This girl! I must know who she is. She is here for some mischief. Ah!"

At that moment there was the rustle of a dress.

A woman came cautiously down the secret stairs. She carried another and small lamp.

"Ensor?"

"Here I am. The work is done."

"I am glad to hear it."

The comer was Mother Rustle.

She spoke very guardedly, and her glance went occasionally toward the stairs as she advanced.

He saw that in her other hand she carried a sachel.

"I mean to take it all up-stairs and pack it in a trunk, for which the express company will call tomorrow," she said, alluding to the balls of gold and silver, while she glanced at them with eyes of delight. "Have you divided off your share of the melting—one-fourth?"

"Not yet."

"Do so then in a hurry, and I will carry my part up now."

"Wait a moment. I have something to say to you first."

"Well, I'm quick."

The eyes of the man, like a duo of saturns, fixed upon her.

"Is that young fellow up-stairs yet?"

"You mean the one you denounced as a woman?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he's all right. You were too fast, Ensor. Why, he is to go out to-night on a burglarizing expedition, and seemed as anxious as the rest for it. I think—"

"Listen to me," interrupted the voice that always seemed to come from between tightly-clinched teeth, as if every word was to be gritted into atoms. "I am not too fast. I can prove it to you. Let us—you and I—go up to the room where the young man is and let me investigate the charge I have made against him."

And he added, with an afterthought:

"Is the other man with him?"

"No—you mean the one who was his partner?"

"Yes."

Rustle did not reveal what Towser had communicated to her—that this "other man" was Ellsworth, the escaped criminal.

"No," she said. "He and the youngster went out and the latter came back alone. He's maybe sent him out of town. I understood he was wanted and being looked for pretty hot. But what is it you want to do?"

"I am a man," said Ensor, impressively, "who never forgets the cast of a countenance nor the color of an eye. I have seen the hazel eyes of that young man before. I know that he is a woman. But I want to make sure. If I make sure, I think you will agree with me that he should die—or she should die!"

"Why, who do you think it is?"

"I believe that the party representing himself as Jack Ruby is no other than Agate Armstrong, the daughter of the man for whose murder Ellsworth was convicted."

"You don't mean it! Why, I know that you had her confined in an asylum as your niece."

"True. But she may have gotten out."

"Well, what do you suspect?"

"That she is hunting down Terry Towser and myself."

This declaration seemed to impress Mother Rustle more than anything that had been previously said.

She loved Towser with her whole heart—such a heart as it was—and would not have anything occur to injure him while it was in her power to prevent it.

"If what you suspect should prove to be true," she said, with a sibilant accent, "I would kill this person who calls himself Jack Ruby with my own hand!"

The saturnine eyes blazed.

"I will save you that trouble!" hissed Ensor. "If it is she, we are all in great danger. She is one of the most to be dreaded girls in the world. She will bring Towser and I to the gallows, and you may be mixed into the affair."

This was enough for the excited woman.

"Come! We'll soon settle the thing, I guess. He is up there now. Come on. But—"

And as they withdrew from the cellar together, they laid a plot for the surprise of Ruby.

Jack Ruby was at the moment in the small apartment at the rear of the second story where we have seen the crooks assemble on a previous occasion.

A tall candle burned upon the table; at the side of the table sat the young man, engaged with a novel of the Claude Duval kind.

The plot alluded to by Mother Rustle as being on hand, and in which this new-comer into the band was to figure, was a long discussed and at last perfected plan to rob a well-known savings bank on south Broadway.

Ruby had been assigned to the part he was to play.

With him in the operation were One-eyed Billy and another crook of burglarious renown.

Towser was to have made one of the crew; but Towser was now strangely and prolongedly absent.

Billy had gone out to look for him in some of the many saloons along Fayette street, which offered quiet places for resort to men of that ilk; the other party was "laying low" until he received word from Mother Rustle that it was time to move toward the bank.

An item that was to be accomplished by different routes to avoid suspicion.

And Jack Ruby had communicated, though at considerable risk of discovery to himself, the facts in detail to Mark Magic.

This was the second message which the detective had received at the same time he heard from the Washington authorities regarding his telegram of inquiry as to the coffin of the murdered man, Silas Armstrong.

The door of the apartment opened and Mother Rustle entered quickly, passing the table and going toward a small chest in the corner as if to get something from it.

Ruby gave her merely a passing glance.

But he looked up and around again quickly as there was the sound of a second person entering.

In the doorway stood Michael Ensor.

The man's bristling face was flushed and his saturn-like eyes were fixed strangely and steadily on Ruby.

Advancing a step, he said, intensely:

"I'll unmask you now, my bold girl. I guess I won't have any lark around now to interfere."

"What do you mean?" demanded Ruby, with spirit, springing from the chair and regarding him fixedly, as the latent threat of the tone was comprehended.

Ensor's lips parted slightly, exhibiting his tight locked teeth in a narrow line of white.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A HORRIBLE DOOM.

THEN through the rows of little, white, close-set teeth, that were like rows of corn on the cob, Ensor said:

"I know you."

"You know me?"

"Yes, and your remarkable boldness will not longer save you."

"Save me?" repeated Ruby, with simulated surprise. "What do you mean by that? Save me—how?"

Mother Rustle, standing behind Ruby and unseen by the latter because of his back being turned toward her, made an impatient gesture to Ensor.

But the man appeared to be so sure of his prey, that he did not hurry.

If the girl really was Erminie, he wished to impress her first with her foolhardiness in attempting to cope with him in the matter of wit.

"You have played a smart and desperate game, miss; but it will end now and here. This night will put an end to your folly. All your previous well-acted part has accomplished nothing."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know you, Erminie, but to make sure I shall first completely unmask you."

We know that it was indeed Erminie—or rather Agate Armstrong. And a wonderful girl was she.

Not a muscle of her face twitched under his words; her hazel eyes remained fixed upon him steadily, with a combined coolness and defiance.

Ensor continued, speaking with something like a rapid hiss:

"Your simulation of insanity was admirable. You deceived Rebecca and myself wholly; ay, and you even deceived the doctors—fools, they, as well as ourselves! But your disguise here is flimsy. You played the game until you were out of my power totally—only to throw yourself into it again."

"I don't understand you. Keep off! Don't come any closer to me. I think you must be a crazy man!"

"My meaning shall be plain enough. You are never to leave this place alive, to bring the knot of a halter around my neck," he gritted, advancing a few steps.

But Ruby quickly drew a revolver, leveling it squarely at his broad breast.

In the candlelight the polished barrel gleamed with a deadly steadiness.

"Another step, sir, and I fire!" was the stern warning that checked him.

But Ensor and the woman had anticipated something of precisely this nature.

And well had they arranged their mode of action while ascending to the room.

Even as the words were on Ruby's lips, a treacherous hand from behind reached forth and gripped the revolver-barrel, forcing it upward with such suddenness that the pressure of the finger on the trigger was tightened, causing an explosion.

The ball harmlessly buried itself in the incased ceiling.

"Quick, there!" cried Rustle, retaining her grasp on the struggling wrist of the young man.

Ensor leaped savagely forward.

At one powerful wrench he disarmed their intended victim.

Mother Rustle had indeed gone to the chest to get something.

What that was, was now made evident.

A long and stout piece of clothes-line.

With this, the two, notwithstanding Ruby fought desperately, succeeded in binding their victim fast arm and limb, and into the strong wooden chair where she had been formerly sitting.

"Now we have you, I think. Ha!" burst from Ensor, as he rudely dragged off the exquisite mustache from the effeminate face, and knocked aside the nobby hat.

The last revealing that the girl's hair had been adroitly gathered up and fastened within a cunning bag of silk, to which was attached a fringing of short and deceptive hair.

Thus revealed was Agate Armstrong before them.

Mother Rustle glared upon the helpless captive with something like the ferocious stare of a she-wolf.

"You were right!" she exclaimed, addressing Ensor. "It is Agate Armstrong—the witness who might have sent you and Terry to the gallows—"

"And I shall do it yet!" cried back the defiant girl, facing them unflinchingly with her flashing eyes of hazel.

"Oh, will you?" mockingly. "Not when we are through with you, I imagine; oh, no! Bring her along, Mikey, chair and all."

As she spoke, she moved toward another side of the paneled room, and at a touch revealed another mode of egress.

A narrow and dark way was there between the walls—a stairway that led downward into an impenetrable blackness.

"What do you intend to do with me?" demanded the dauntless girl, following the movements of the woman.

"Bury you!" was the hard response.

"You would bury me alive?"

"You will see."

"Heaven will not permit such a foul thing!" exclaimed the girl, fearlessly. "I shall be delivered from you, never fear!"

Ensor laughed in a grating, demoniac exultation.

"Yes, we'll bury you, miss, and so have you out of our way forever."

Obedying the command of Mother Rustle, he took up the captive, chair and all, bearing her toward the intermural way.

As the two murderous ones disappeared within the wall, Mother Rustle necessarily assisting him in the descent, a face appeared at the other door—the door that led to the passage to the lower part of the building—and gazed after them with an expression of mingled surprise and horror.

It was the girl, Kitty Diamond.

She had heard the expressed intention of the assassin pair.

Though wicked herself and inured to the lawless customs of the crook band with which she had been long intimate, she felt a thrill of repulsion for this deed contemplated by her employer and the new man, Ensor.

And she had begun to think a great deal of this young fellow who had so recently joined the band—a feeling not at all lessened, but rather heightened, when she discovered that in making him a victim to a horrible plot, they were sacrificing a young and beautiful girl.

Kitty had not fallen so far down in the criminal scale yet that she could witness unmoved a crime so terrible.

"They're going to put her down in the hole where the old sewer drop was!" burst from her lips, in a gasp. "Good Lord! I couldn't do such a thing as that! Murder's bad enough, but a murder like that—No, I won't permit it if I can help it and if I risk my own life to prevent it, I won't!"

She stole hastily after the couple as far as the entrance to the secret passage.

She could hear their voices below, still mocking the unfortunate girl whose bravery had brought her to such a strait.

And by what she heard, she knew that she was right in her surmise that they would place Agate in an underground compartment that once led to the great sewer to the falls along Marsh Market Space.

Then she flitted away.

As she went, she muttered again:

"They sha'n't do it—they sha'n't!"

Down, down went the evil pair with their captive.

It would seem that at the back of the cellar where we have seen Ensor at work melting the gold and silver comprised of stolen articles that had found their way to Mother Rustle's fence, there had formerly existed another portion of that cellar.

This had been since walled up.

In the rear portion had been a large drop-hole leading to the great sewer in Harrison street.

Placed there, as it had been similarly placed in other houses in that vicinity, to drain off after the usual floods that made the locality at all times of a treacherous dampness.

Rustle waved the flickering candle forward as they came near the hole; Ensor, bending near, after setting down the chair to which Agate was firmly bound, could hear the sluggish ripple of filthy water below the surface.

"A good place," he said, brutally. "But wouldn't it be better to make an end of her at once and done with it?"

The woman grimaced in a demonish way.

"Oh, that won't be necessary. There will be a host of executioners here before long."

"What do you mean?"

"Rats!" was the significant reply. "After awhile the rats will swarm up here to see what means the unusual scent of human flesh. Ravenous enough are they. And maybe," glancing with an awful mockery toward the girl—"maybe they'll be so kind as to gnaw off the ropes from her wrists and legs and give her a chance to fight them and escape. Ha, ha, ha, look!" pointing toward the large, square hole.

"There is the only avenue through which she can ever get out. She can try crawling all the way

to the Basin, if the rats will permit it! Ha, ha, ha!" and again she laughed in her fiendish way.

Ensor seemed to be satisfied with the prospect of the inevitable death for Agate. Its cruelty, too, evidently pleased him.

"Come," he said. "Let's be getting up out of this."

They started toward the stairway.

Brave as she was, Agate shuddered.

"Do you really mean to consign me to such a fate as this?" she cried after them, as if to the last she doubted their being the horrible fiends they promised themselves to be.

"Good-by," was all that was vouchsafed her in reply, and from Mother Rustle, who, after all, appeared to be the most hardened.

Then darkness.

An awful, stilly darkness, like the ghost-haunted stillness of a tomb, where fancy could picture in the depths around the presence of stiffened corpses and an odor from the sewer-hole not unlike the smell of putrefying flesh.

A ripple of sluggish water from the sewer-hole, too.

"William! William!" she moaned, in her tried heart. "Who shall work for you now? Who shall prove your innocence? And, oh, God! your trial will soon take place—I shall be dead, dead, and no one to help you!"

Suddenly a great thought entered her tortured brain.

"Mark Magic!" burst from her lips, whisperingly there in the surrounding of chaotic blackness.

"Mark Magic knows that I am here! He has the information about the contemplated bank robbery! He will be somewhere on hand to prevent the robbery! He knows that I was to be one of the gang sent to do the work! I will not be there! He will miss me! He will soon discover that I have disappeared! He will search for me as the witness to prove Ellsworth's innocence, and will search here at the den of Mother Rustle the first place! I may be saved!"

But another thought cast a depression of somberness on this one transient moment of hope.

She realized that the place of her confinement could only be reached by the secret way.

How could Magic ever find that way, cunningly as it was contrived in the room of panels?

And the sluggish water in the great hole rippled on and on, seeming to grow tantalizing each moment the more with its almost life-like utterance of a ghastly promise that the rats, the sewer-rats, would soon come to feast upon this rare and beautiful prey of human flesh.

Meantime Kitty Diamond, with the picture of the horrible crime that was being perpetrated fixed burning in her mind, hastened down-stairs to the shop.

Here she found a customer.

An elderly gentleman with gray whiskers.

"Do you keep this place?" he inquired.

"No, sir. But I can wait on you, sir. What is it you want?"

"Where is your mistress?—if you are a clerk here?"

"She's busy just now, sir. What'll you have?"

"Is she in the house?" persisted the stranger.

Kitty was accustomed to the ways of crooks who were peculiarly cautious when coming to the fence for the first time—probably when sent by an outside pal who gave them the pointer on the place.

"Oh, she's busy up-stairs. You can't see her just now. I'll wait on you. Come, what is it?"

"Is your employer up stairs in the little back room at the rear?" he asked, regarding her steadily.

"Seems to me you want to know a heap, you do!"

"Yes. Will you answer me?"

"Well, then, yes, she is."

"How many men are up there with her at this moment?"

Kitty gazed at the speaker in wide-eyed astonishment.

This was a new manner of man to be coming to the fence.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A BLAZING ROOKERY.

"SEEMS to me you're pretty fresh," the girl said, a little sharply, and tossing her head.

"Perhaps I am. I am one of those individuals who will not be put off without answers."

"Oh, you ain't, eh?" derisively.

The man proceeded very deliberately to remove the gray whiskers from his face.

The action did not astonish the girl.

She was used to seeing the burglars and other crooks who came to the fence wearing disguises, which they sometimes retained even when safe within the establishment of Mother Rustle.

But when he had completed his slight transformation, he slyly turned down the lapel of his vest and displayed a bright silver badge with but one word engraved upon it and the word blackened so that the letters stood prominently out.

Then Kitty's eyes widened indeed, and a pallor came into her rather comely face.

The word she read there was:

Detective!

The man was no other than our sleuth, Magic.

He looked at the girl quietly.

"You see," he said, with the coolest accent possible, "I am not to be put off without answers."

"What do you want here?" she gasped.

"I want an answer. Is Mother Rustle up-stairs in the little back room? And if she is, how many of the men are up there with her?—I mean particularly the men who intended to rob the Broadway savings-bank to-night."

This last utterance was a startler.

Kitty trembled all over.

"Answer!" commanded the detective.

"There's only one up there with her," she said, reluctantly.

"Where are the rest?"

"I don't know. They haven't come in yet," sub-

duedly, and staring at the sleuth, any attempt to deceive whom she saw intelligently would be useless.

"Lead the way up to the room," the detective next said, as he stepped toward the opening at the rear of the counter.

She mechanically obeyed.

Kitty felt that the whole gang were now in for it; there was no use in check or defiance.

The detective had the place down fine enough, since he had revealed his knowledge that there was to be a burglarious attempt that very night and had come after the identical burglars to be concerned in it.

She led the way up through the narrow boxed stairway without a single protest.

Magic, on the alert, followed closely.

As they neared the paneled room, which had appeared to be enveloped in total darkness, suddenly there was a glimmer as of candle-light.

Ensor and the woman had returned from their horrible errand in the walled-up cellar.

Perceiving who the man was, Magic promptly stepped into the room, and as he did so drew a brace of revolvers.

In the next moment a tableau transpired.

The evil pair found themselves confronted by the leveled weapons, and the stern voice of the man who held them said:

"Surrender, Michael Ensor, and save me the trouble of boring a hole through you!"

They stood transfixed.

Into Ensor's eyes came a lurid glare, but it vanished instantly as he recognized in this person the same who had come so remarkably through the skylight on the other occasion when he would have unmasked the supposed Jack Ruby.

He believed the man to be a detective then.

He was convinced of it forcibly now.

And there was no escape.

Magic stood between the doorway and himself.

Those glittering revolvers meant sure death if he dared to make a rush for it.

In the transient moment of the tableau, Kitty had noiselessly slipped away into the entry, and fled.

"All right," replied Ensor, with a scowl; "I surrender."

"Hold out your wrists."

As he said this he threw a pair of handcuffs on the floor, adding, with a commanding glance at the woman:

"Now, Mother Rustle, oblige me by putting those bracelets on him, and be in a hurry about it."

"I won't," she declared, with an obstinate toss of her head.

"Oh! yes, you will!"

"You can't make me."

"I can, indeed. I have in my pocket a warrant for the arrest of yourself and several of your gang who are duly named. That warrant says: 'To be taken dead or alive!' If you refuse to do as I tell you about the handcuffs I shall drop you where you stand, as a part of the necessary preliminary to the carrying out of the warrant. Put on the bracelets!"

"Would—would you dare to kill me?" she half-stammered.

"Try me for just one minute more. That is the longest time I will give you to obey," and his tone showed that he meant every word that he uttered.

"Better do as he says," urged Ensor, who did not see why the woman should sacrifice herself thus in a spirit of obstinacy.

He held out his hands, and in another moment the thing was accomplished.

"Now search him for weapons."

This was done, and Ensor was found to be unarmed. She made the examination faithfully, again urged by Ensor.

"Seat yourself in the chair and remain perfectly quiet," the detective said to the captive man—an order that was obeyed.

But as this was being done, and as Magic stepped forward Rustle, with the bundle in hand, made a desperate dash for the door, notwithstanding the warning she had received.

As she ran she blew out the candle flame.

The detective's revolver barked after her; but in the darkness he knew he had missed her, for her footsteps continued audible in her wild flight down the stairs.

"No matter," he said, aloud. "She cannot escape from the house, for it is now guarded front and rear."

Ensor, as the darkness ensued upon the extinguishment of the light, half-started from the chair.

Perhaps he had thought that he too might effect his escape.

But the thought was speedily dispelled.

The barrel of a revolver was thrust fairly into his ear, and Magic's stern voice said:

"Take care! Remember how the warrant reads. If you make a tricky move you are a dead man. Beware, I say!"

At that moment there was a sound at the door, which Magic detected by the knowledge gained on his previous advent into the place.

The door that opened out upon the exterior stairway.

Forcing Ensor forward, while he still kept the revolver in his prisoner's ear, he presently found the key to the massive lock and drew the door ajar.

"Time?" asked a muffled voice from a figure outside.

"Castor?"

"I—on time."

The corner was the shadow.

"Have you a lantern?"

"Always carry an adjustable one," was the response.

As if divining what the question meant, Castor soon had his pocket-lantern lighted and flashing around the room.

Ensor was again placed in the chair.

The two took up a strange position as if on the watch for some one beside the door.

The panel door leading to the little corridor had been shut by the draught of the last opening door.

"Are you sure you made this place without being seen?" asked Magic, addressing his subordinate.

"Yes, I'm sure enough of that—Hark!"

Both detected a slight sound like the scraping of feet on the landing outside.

Then the little signal gong clanged.

The lantern was darkened and the door opened.

A man entered.

"Why, hello, Kit! wot's the racket? Where's the light—"

"The light is here!"

The lantern was suddenly turned full on the man, who was One-eyed Billy.

While he gaped as if paralyzed with amazement, a revolver shining under his very nose in the hand of Magic, the shadow quickly snapped the handcuffs on the fellow.

A guttural laugh came from Ensor, as he saw the neatness of the operation.

"Game's up, Billy," he said. "Might as well give in without a squeal. These fellows are detectives—and I think they know their business."

"Well, I'm blasted!"

"Silence!" ordered Magic, as his keen ears caught another sound on the outside.

The sound of fire-bells.

There was a dull murmur that told of an excitement on the street without.

The bells clanged louder, the distant and sonorous throat of the great bell on the city hall sending its thunderous peals even into that half-smothered place with its tight casing.

"It's close by," said Castor, when they had listened for a few seconds.

The alarm was No. 212.

Hook and Ladder truck-house, on Harrison street. And close indeed was the fire.

For a moment later Magic exclaimed:

"Look at the smoke! Why, the place itself must be afire!"

The room had grown suddenly misty with a dim cloud that hovered round the flickering candle flame.

"Out of this," commanded the detective, with a sudden resolution. "We must let the other fellow go. We have two, however, and this one," pointing to Michael Ensor, "is the most valuable catch of all."

At that instant there came the thumping of many feet on the outside stairway.

Heavy blows rained on the door, as if given with an ax.

Two firemen, axes in hand burst in.

"You'd better be getting out of here?" cried one, as they came upon the occupants of the room.

Others were coming up the steps, dragging the hose after them.

They realized then that the rookery of Mother Rustle was the building in flames.

"Where's the door?" cried another. "The fire's in front."

Magic indicated where the panel door was, and in a trice the axes in the brawny arms had crushed through it.

Castor collared One-eyed Billy, and Magic, with a hold on Ensor, led the way from the building.

As they passed out they came into the glare of the flames that had already burst out at the front, sending their black accompanying smoke and showers of sparks up to the moonless heavens of night.

On the street all was confusion, where none but the trained firemen seemed to have one atom of self-possession remaining.

People hurrying from adjoining premises with apparel and furniture, scrambling hither and thither with a frenzy something akin to distraction.

A squad of four policemen who had been detached to accompany Magic in his raid upon the rookery, stood near the alley, half in hesitation as to whether they should remain at their posts or assist in restoring order out of the exciting scene.

Magic with his prisoners soon decided them.

Ensor and One-eyed Billy were given in charge and marched off to the station-house.

And many, as they spied the pair, mistakenly cried:

"There they go! They've caught 'em! There's the men who set the place afire!"

Mother Rustle was the cause of the conflagration.

In her flight, after having extinguished the candle, she had cast the useless article aside without observing that there was remaining a bright red spark like a glowing ember, on the end of the black wick.

The candle fell squarely into a pile of waste.

The combustible material instantly caught up the spark, and in five minutes there burst forth a licking flame, which, in the dry and inflammable surroundings, immediately became a roaring conflagration.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE PLUCK OF WHICH DETECTIVES ARE MADE!

As Magic and his subordinate, Castor, stood side by side, dividing their glances between the departing prisoners and the scene of excitement around them amid the glare of the burning building, suddenly a girl's shriek rent the air above all the other din.

A female form came rushing toward them.

It was Kitty Diamond.

Her hair had fallen loose, and in the tremor of the blaze that filled the crooked street, she looked very weird and pale.

"Ah!" exclaimed Magic, as he reached and grasped her by the arm. "You ran away from me, eh? I have you again!"

"Oh, sir, for the love of Heaven listen to me! Do not talk about the men you've arrested, but listen. Some one is in awful peril! Some one who is helpless is under that burning house this minute and may die in the flames!"

"Who is it?"

"It is the one who came to join Mother Rustle's band under the name of Jack Ruby—"

"What?"

Magic almost jumped from his feet at the announcement.

"They—Mother Rustle and the man you saw with her in the room—had just taken the young lady in the man's clothes down a secret way to a cellar under the house that hasn't any way to get into it except from a panel in that very room. Nobody could ever find her if I didn't happen to see them an' now, sir, oh, I don't want for her to die! I'd almost feel as if I had something to do with it, because I was one of the band. You can arrest me, if you want to. I won't run away, indeed I won't. But, oh, oh, oh, do something to save that beautiful girl from the horrible fate that will soon be hers if she is not rescued—"

Almost before she had finished, the electrified detective demanded, with startled tones:

"Where is she, you say? In the cellar? How am I to get at her? Speak quick; for even now it may

be too late. See! the firemen are being driven by the flames away from that very room in the back building!"

His eyes were fixed, as he spoke, in a wide, staring way on the rear portion of the rookery.

Kitty, in her overpowering excitement, reeled as if about to fall.

Castor caught and sustained her.

"Behind the panels! She's down the stairs behind the secret panels!" and then she fainted.

Magic sprang back toward the stairs that ran up on the outside of the house.

The firemen, beaten at last by the stifling volumes of smoke and the intense heat of the flames, were retreating slowly downward, manfully playing the stream of water from the hose-pipe which two of them held as they came down the scorched steps.

"Hold on, there, you fool!" cried one of these, as he divined the running man's intention of forcing an entrance back into the building despite the roar and crackle and billowing waves of suffocating density.

He paused only to show his badge—at the same time snatching up an ax that fortunately lay at his feet at the moment.

Swinging the implement aloft, he sprang boldly into the vortex that was already beginning to engulf the incased room in the second story of the back building.

Forward, through firebrands, flames and draughts of choking blackness and smell—forward he went.

At the walls he went, striking here and there with all his strength to discover which of the panels the girl meant.

For she had swooned before directing him definitely.

Around, through interstices that had been burned out, the long tongues of flame were coming by darts and lappings, as if propelled by a powerful draught on the opposite sides of the walls and aiming to coil around the form of the brave detective who thus faced death, as it were, to save a person who was, besides being a beautiful girl, a most important witness in the case Magic had so far made out for the apprehension of the true murderer of Silas Armstrong.

He knew that without the testimony of Agate Armstrong, it would be hard indeed to fasten the guilt on Ensor and Tower.

But above all—it was a lovely and imperiled female—helpless, his informant had said.

It roused all the determination of his brave manhood in an instant.

In the moment that he grasped up the ax, he had resolved to save her or die in the attempt.

Crash, crash! smote the ax on the walls, here and there, only to strike again on the hard bricks.

Despair was seizing him, as his efforts seemed only futile, and as the fire, the smoke, the ominous roar of the flames came nearer, nearer, until, through the widening gaps of the planks the seething caldron of fire was visible beyond, only waiting for the remaining and thin partition of blisters to shrink away and admit them in a flood of destruction into the room where he so nobly worked.

Again and again the crash of the ax.

The firemen outside, as they heard, knew by the sound that issued from that almost impenetrable mass of black smoke, that a man—a man either foolhardy or desperate in some wonderful cause—was striving to accomplish something in the very face of a horrible death.

Then out through the smoke issued to those who stood listening and looking for a result that they could only conjecture, a triumphant cry that sounded far out over the adjoining roofs where the firemen were climbing and working afresh to save the adjoining buildings.

The detective had found the panel.

But oh, how close now that increasing wall of fire, only kept from pouring in a torrent upon him by a thin and reddened partition.

Smiling, prying, tearing with his hands and with the shining blade of the ax, he at last forced the way open.

Half smothered with smoke—though a momentary cool draught that came up from below gave him a fresh breath for the effort ahead—he dashed downward in the darkness under the house.

"Where are you!" he cried at the top of his stifled lungs. "Are you here? Answer! Are you here?" and there was a strain to his voice as if each particle of a second that elapsed was a torture to his overwrought brain.

But the answer came—came and thrilled his brave breast with a tumult of delight.

"Mark Magic! Here! Help! My God! I am saved!"

Another instant and there in that terrible darkness he had grasped her, with the blackness of the tomb below and the glare of a holocaust above.

There was no time to stop for a loosening of the bonds that bound Agate to the chair.

He tore off his coat, wrapped it around her head, then, laying a very giant's hold upon the back of the chair with both hands, he dragged her and the chair up, up, up into the flare, the heat, the smoke, the possible death that waited for both above.

But death was not to be for one so brave.

Though but another second seemed to remain ere the structure would collapse in that terrible heat, Magic had time to reach the outside stairs.

His clothing was in a blaze in portions; the heat had already singed his eyebrows and half-blinded him temporarily.

The multitude on the roofs and the firemen who were working still in the inclosure below, saw something like a demon form, leaving a trail of sparks, emerge from that elevated doorway, descending tottering to the ground under the weight of what appeared to be a chair with a man tied fast to seat and rounds.

Castor was on hand, with the girl still in his grasp.

But Kitty was not thinking of escape.

She sprang to this rescued being of her own sex tenderly.

Magic was caught in the arms of his subordinate. "A close call that," said Castor, gravely, for he knew not how far the detective might have been injured by the flames.

Magic's face was blackened, his eyebrows completely gone.

But with that exception and the fact that it took some time to extinguish the burning parts of the

clothing, he seemed to have sustained no other injury than a loss of strength.

He threw himself into the spray of a bursted section of hose and gained a blessed relief from the cool water.

"It's all right," he assured the shadow at his side. "I don't think I'm hurt at all. But don't lose sight of the girl and the one I rescued. The last is a witness in a murder case that I wouldn't have got from under my eyes for a good amount of money."

Agate was, perhaps, the coolest in the party that knotted together in the inclosure, where the roar of the burning house, the shouts of the firemen and the din of engine-whistles and carriage-bells made the scene and sound one to excite a person beyond all self-control if unused to such sights.

It was some time ere they could extricate themselves from the crowd.

When this was accomplished at last, they hurried toward the detective's office.

Kitty accompanied them.

The girl seemed glad beyond expression that she had not fled so far as to render the service she had performed impossible.

Agate pressed the hand of her rescuer warmly, saying:

"I shall never forget, Mr. Magic, that but for you, I would have died a death too horrible to be imagined."

The marshal received Magic and learned of what had occurred with a rather serious countenance.

"If I had lost you, Magic," he remarked. "But why did you make such a remarkable exertion especially for this young person who you say is the person you gave permission to act as one of the detective force in the case of Ellsworth?"

"Because it is a woman."

"I suspected as much," said the official, glancing keenly at the beautiful girl who stood to one side.

"Marshal, cannot you guess who it is?" Magic queried.

"Why, no."

"It is the one living witness who can prove William Ellsworth's innocence; this the more positive now, since I have caged another person who has already, in a partial and informal confession to me, corroborated what this young lady has told me regarding the murder of her father. You ask how I have found her? Well, do not forget the clue or the cipher which you rejected as a mere fancy on my part. All my theories in regard to it have proven true, because they have, on the following, led up to the present results. A very lucky thing it was that the young man Ellsworth could obtain a second trial. For at the next term of court I shall secure his release and produce the real murderer of Silas Armstrong, with sufficient evidence to send him to the gallows, I assure you."

"You will produce the real murderer?"

"I will produce the man known as Michael Ensor. And Michael Ensor killed Silas Armstrong, as the testimony I have gathered with some pains will amply prove."

Agate was provided with suitable garments for her sex, and accompanied by the detective, went to a hotel.

Kitty Diamond begged so persistently to be allowed to accompany the girl who owed her life to this girl of the burglars' haunt, that Agate was not loth to permit it.

Kitty had said:

"I haven't any home, miss. I'm tired of being living the life I have. And after to-night, when I came near being one of a gang that would have done such an atrocious murder, I can never think of going back to the old life. My whole nature seems to be changed, miss, indeed it is. And if you, who have I know enough, and more than enough, to help me, will help me to begin a different life, I may be saved after all. Will you help me?"

Agate promised with some emotion to assist this brand from the burning with all her power.

Kitty went along.

Having seen Agate made comfortable with her new companion, Mark Magic set out for the Central District station-house.

"It is about the end of the trail, I guess," he mused, as, with face still smarting from his recent adventures and appearance altered without the aid of disguise, he presented himself before the captain of the station and asked to be admitted to the two prisoners recently brought in by the posse.

But, near though the end of the trail seemed, there was that in store for Mark Magic which was to prove soon one of the most remarkable surprises that had ever occurred for him during his whole detective career.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BARLOW'S ASYLUM HEARD FROM.

ENSOR arose sullenly from the bench in the narrow cell.

He folded his arms across his breast and gazed with a scowl at the corner.

The saturn orbs had a cunningly-dogged stare in them.

"Well, Mikey, we're getting down to the end of the trail, aren't we, now?" saluted the detective coolly.

"What trail do you mean?"

"Oh, come, now. Don't play off. It's all to no purpose, you must know. We've got you down so fine that you couldn't be whittled to a closer point any way at all. The game's up—as you said to our worthy villain, One-eyed Billy, to-night, at the den of Mother Rustle's."

"You cannot prove that I have had any hand in anything crooked that has been done by the gang there," rejoined the prisoner gruffly, while his orbs grew shrewder than ever in their baleful glitter.

"Oh, I know that. I don't want you for anything that has happened there—not at all. I'm talking about quite another matter."

"What matter, then?"

"Why, the murder of Silas Armstrong of course."

Ensor seemed to be totally unprepared for this. Notwithstanding he made an instantaneous and great effort, he could not conceal that he was startled.

"You are talking in more of a riddle than ever," he said, gruffer than before.

"Now, Mikey, let me tell you something that may make your hair stand a little on end in alarmed sur-

prise," Magic said, coming easily forward and speaking in the most quiet manner that could be imagined.

And pausing again closer to the man, he continued:

"You and a man named Terry Towser have had a pretty free and easy trail of it up to the present time. Here the time ends. You are cornered. I have Towser safe in the station-house, and he has partially confessed to the part you and he played in the killing of Silas Armstrong—a crime for which a young man named Ellsworth came very near being hung. Will you confess to me so as to save trouble at the trial; or shall the ball go on rolling that will eventually bring you directly under the halter?"

"You are mistaken. I did not kill Silas Armstrong nor anybody else," said Ensor, firmly.

"I think I can prove the contrary."

"Can you? Do so, then," was the deeply spoken response, and the balefully gazing eyes assumed a deader hue.

"There is another witness to draw the man out if he could."

"I fear no witnesses. I have done nothing of the kind you charge against me."

"Do you not think that Agate Armstrong could give some testimony that might go far toward convicting you?"

"Agate Armstrong is dead," broke in the deep voice, and there was just the slightest perceptible parting of the bristling lips over the corn-grain teeth in a peculiar smile of derision.

"How do you know that she is dead?"

"It matters not—I know it; that is enough. Even if she were living, there is nothing she could testify to against me to implicate me in the murder at which you hint."

He felt a reasonable confidence under ordinary circumstances as he thus spoke.

He had seen enough to show that the burning rookery could not possibly be saved; Agate Armstrong was buried alive beneath the ruins ere this, and only her whitened and blackened bones could ever be found, and they not possibly identified.

"But what about the confession of Terry Towser?" Magic asked.

"I know that a man by that name belonged to Mother Rustle's gang. He is a hard criminal whose testimony, I imagine, would scarcely be sufficient to hang a man—especially an innocent man. And if he should have asserted, as you say he has—though why he should do so I cannot guess, as there is not the slightest truth in such a statement—let us see if he will swear that he saw me strike Silas Armstrong or any other man."

Magic could not but realize that Ensor would make a strong point there.

He had another shot in store, however.

"You have made a slight mistake in one thing," he said.

"Have I?"

"Agate Armstrong is not dead."

"Oh, yes she is," was the confident rejoinder.

"No; to the contrary, she is alive and well, and at this moment is at the Carrollton Hotel, with the girl Kitty Diamond. It was Kitty, you know, who told us about you and Mother Rustle taking the young lady Agate, bound fast to a chair, down into the secret underground apartment. It was a narrow escape for Agate Armstrong; but all the same, she was rescued before being hurt in the least.—Why! what's the matter, Mikey?" as he saw a terrible hue of pallor overspread the face of Ensor.

The villain half-reeled back to his bench.

Then rallying, he cried, with vehemence:

"Agate Armstrong, alive or dead, cannot testify to the truth against me if she says I struck her father. I did not kill Silas Armstrong!"

"Oh! you are an innocent individual, I presume, of course," remarked Magic, sarcastically. "Well, since you won't come out, all right, then. I shall go ahead with the matter on the ground that I have two witnesses to prove that Michael Ensor killed Silas Armstrong. If you can clear yourself, I shall have no objections; but I doubt your ability in that par—"

"Come here. Listen to me," suddenly said Ensor, rising and making to lay a hand on the detective's arm.

"Well what do you want to say?"

"What the man Towser has said is true in all save one thing."

"What is that?"

"I repeat, I did not kill Armstrong."

"How can you explain the little scene that Towser has given away?—the prearranged signal, and his finding you bending over the body."

"There is no doubt that we meant to kill Armstrong; but by a most inexplicable circumstance, neither Towser nor myself did that deed."

"Too thin. You'll each be trying to clear the other after a while, I suppose."

"Listen."

Ensor rapidly and correctly related the same tale as told by Towser in regard to the plan to waylay the old man on the road from Bladensburg to his farm.

"But," he added, "when I reached my part of the road above the forks, I found there the wagon, and Armstrong lying in the road already dead. In the excitement that followed and after I had called Towser, I did not think to explain to him about my having found that some one had anticipated us. I was in a fume at not finding the money-belt. We separated. And I suppose that Towser really believes to this day that I did the deed. I am innocent. But if there is to be a punishment on the strength of the evidence, that dog of a traitor shall share it fully," he concluded, with a vengeful accent.

"You shall have an opportunity to prove what you say," the detective said, as he turned abruptly and left the cell.

He had accomplished his object; gained an acknowledgment from the prisoner that Towser's account was correct.

He did not, of course, credit, for an instant, the assertion of Ensor that Armstrong had been found by him already dead.

Seeking the restaurant where, as has been before said, Mark Magic had private rooms, he sought some sleep.

He was tired after the recent adventures of the rather remarkable trail, and his slight wounds from

the burning building needed more attention than they had so far received.

Bright and early in the morning he was astir.

He learned, among first things, that Mother Rustle, the keeper of the Harrison street fence, had in some way effected her escape from the house and from the city, as an after-investigation of the house on St. Paul street showed.

He next visited Agate at the hotel and had a brief conversation with her.

From there he went to the southern station for another little talk with Towser.

Towser's equanimity did not seem to have suffered long after the first visit of the detective which promised such trouble in store for that worthy.

He was regaling himself on a good breakfast of beefsteak and onions, washed down alternately by foamy beer.

"Mornin'," he said, as Magic entered, and with a mouth so crammed that his cheeks were distended.

"Good-morning, my friend. I have just come from a visit to your pal, Ensor."

"See'd Mikey this mornin', have ye? That's kind o' ye. Makin' the round o' all yer acquaintances, I reckon, to-day?"

"Yes, and I thought I would like to tell you what Ensor has to say about your story."

"Wal," stuffing more meat and onions into his capacious jaws, "an' w'ot did he say?"

"He tells pretty much the same tale that you do—"

"O' course. There ain't no other tale fer to tell."

"But he reverses it a little."

Towser looked around from his repast inquiringly.

"He says that you were the man who bent over the dead body of Silas Armstrong in the road, and that it was you who called him up, instead of his calling you up—"

Beefsteak and onions flew from the mouth of Terry Towser, as he blurted an oath, and half the beer was spilled upon the table, as he brought the mug down with a thump, ejaculating:

"He said that! Mikey said that 'ere!"

Magic nodded.

"Then he are the blastedest liar w'ot ever drewed a breath, an' I hope to die this minute if he ain't!"

Then, after he had choked and coughed over the victuals, he had partially ejected and partly swallowed "the wrong way," he exclaimed, with great earnestness:

"Now, I'm done, I am! There! Take me in! Run me right inter court to one't. I don't keer a cent. I'll tell the whole thing an' give it straight, so help me Bob! W'ot—Mikey tried for to shove it onter me? Wall! But take me inter court. I'm just achin' for to open my mouth an' let me tongue spout the news to Mary, I am!"

"You are fully resolved to adhere to your story?"

"You bet I am! An' Mike'll find he done wrong when he tried that there game. I was willin' for to take punishment—but I hope to be bu'sted if I'll stand that. I didn't no more kill the old man than you did."

Magic might have said more, but at that juncture there seemed to be a commotion in the station office outside.

He heard a voice say:

"Yes, sir, it's so, an' you'd better send somebody over there, 'cause I can't find no officers over onto the Ann Arundel shore."

Magic instantly recognized the voice of Sam Flack, the assistant at the mad-house.

He stepped out into the office while the turnkey relocated the door of Towser's cell.

Flack recognized the detective.

"You'd better go over there too, sir, since you've seen something of the man."

"What man? What is it about, captain?"

"This fellow says that there's been a shooting affair over at the mad-house kept by Billy Barlow—"

"It's the man with the beard that we had to keep confined so close, you know. He broke loose at last and made for the doctor. Then, to save his own life, the doctor had to shoot him. It was a awful scene, sir; I seen it, an' was a-runnin' for to help the doctor. It was a case of self-defense, sir, if ever was."

"I have some knowledge of the man who has been shot," Magic said to the police captain. "I think you had better detail an officer to go over there, and perhaps the station surgeon. I will accompany them. But I wish another party to go—a young lady who is stopping at the Carrollton. I think the man may be her father, though that is only a conjecture. Please send a messenger for her."

A messenger was dispatched at once for Agate, and the station surgeon summoned.

For Sam said Doctor Barlow was so prostrated by the occurrence that he could render no service to the wounded man, even if he should have survived the bullet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MAN WHO KILLED SILAS ARMSTRONG!

The object of Magic's visit to the hotel had been to inform Agate Armstrong that he might require her presence at any moment during the day, and he would like her to hold herself in readiness to come to him when he should send for her.

It was his intention to take her to the asylum to see the bearded man there, for the purpose of settling the fact positively as to whether that man was her father mysteriously come to life after the tragedy on the Bladensburg road.

The dispatch he had received so promptly from the Washington authorities had informed him that the coffin in Congressional Cemetery had been found intact, and the body therein was identified by the cemetery-keeper as that of Silas Armstrong, or at least the same man who was buried in it as Armstrong.

To make assurance doubly sure, however, he had decided upon bringing Silas Armstrong's daughter face to face with the mysterious personage.

The exciting intelligence brought to the station by Sam Flack hastened his movements in this particular.

He hoped that the man was not killed outright, as an identification could be made more sure if he was alive and could speak with his own child.

Agate came promptly upon receipt of the message.

A hack with her in it drew up before the station

in a short time, and Magic, accompanied by the station surgeon and an officer, entered the conveyance with her.

They were driven rapidly to Barlow's asylum.

When they entered the building, they were met by Mrs. Flack, who appeared to be greatly excited.

"It's been awful times here," she said, recognizing the detective. "An' I don't think he's dead yet, for I saw his eyelids a quiverin' like."

With Magic in the lead beside Mrs. Flack, the party ascended to the upper floor.

They were greeted by the customary series of yells, howlings and screeches from the rows of strong cages holding the incurable maniacs.

At the cell at the far end of the corridor, they paused to look at its door.

The woodwork looked as if the gripe of a giant had wrenched its panels into splinters, beginning at that portion where the hands could obtain a leverage upon the small opening heretofore mentioned.

Its almost total demolition showed what an extraordinary strength was possessed by the strange bearded occupant.

On a cot inside, which had been placed there immediately after the tragic event, lay the man.

He had been bleeding freely, for the scant clothing of the cot was stained copiously with the red fluid of life.

Still as a corpse lay the man.

But, as Mrs. Flack had advised them, life was not yet extinct, and the surgeon at once went to work in detail.

During which, Magic asked:

"Where is Doctor Barlow?"

"He's abed, sir. Do you want to see him right away? Between him an' this one, me an' the gate-keeper has been powerful busy. It was self-defense, sir, indeed, for I saw the whole o' it from the windy. The doctor had to shoot him to save his own life. An' the maniac had him by the throat then, sir. He's a giant, he is, an' there wasn't any hope for the doctor but to do what he did—"

"You all seem to be sure that the man was a maniac?" said the detective, inquiringly.

"Indeed, indeed, he was, sir!"

At this point the surgeon said:

"He will probably have a few moments of consciousness presently, but it will not last long. He cannot live. Would it not be a good thing to send for a justice of the peace and have his ante-mortem statement taken—"

He paused as another personage entered the room.

Sam Flack, before galloping over into the city, had ridden hard and fast hither and thither, inquiring of every one whom he met where he could find a justice of the peace for the county, or a constable, or anybody whom he believed to be imperatively necessary at the asylum after what had transpired.

The news circulated rapidly among the nearer farm-houses, and it was not long before a justice of the peace was himself on the way to the asylum.

It was this personage who now entered.

"I am the one you speak of," he announced. "My name is Bayard Appleby, Justice of the Peace for Ann Arundel county."

"Your arrival is opportune, sir," said Magic, introducing himself at the same time.

The surgeon resumed his labors on the severely wounded man.

A few minutes later and the struggling spark of life temporarily asserted itself.

The weird man with the beard opened his eyes.

He sent a stare from rolling orbs over the little assemblage.

His mind seemed to wander for a second.

Then he said, in a hushed way:

"I was shot, wasn't I?"

"Yes, my friend," replied the surgeon. "You have been badly hurt, very badly hurt."

"Will I die?"

"I fear there is but little hope for you."

Magic whispered to the surgeon.

Then he brought Agate forward.

The moment she gazed upon the man, she exclaimed:

"Great Heaven! My father!"

But in the next breath, and while her staring hazel eyes were fixed upon the pain-distorted face, she added:

"No, I am mistaken. It is not he. But how wonderfully like!"

"You are quite positive, miss, that he is not your father?" Magic asked.

"Yes, I am. But the resemblance is wonderful."

The detective was satisfied.

"Who is that girl?" demanded the wounded man.

"Her name is Agate Armstrong," answered the detective, as he took a position near the cot.

Instantly upon hearing the name, the sufferer seemed to writhe with an inward spasm.

"I am to die?" he said, inquisitively.

"I might as well tell you the truth," replied the surgeon. "You cannot survive that wound another hour."

"It is well. I suppose my time has come. I want to make a confession. You had better remove that girl from the room, for what I have to say will not be pleasant for her ears."

"What has she to do with a confession from you?" interrogated the detective, in a whisper.

"You heard what she said when she saw me? You announced that she was Agate Armstrong. I can recognize her myself now—the resemblance to the Armstrongs, I mean. Well, I am the man who killed her father!"

"You killed Silas Armstrong?"

The detective was amazed beyond expression.

"Yes. What I say is so. I want to make a confession here on my death-bed."

Here was a truly wonderful development in the trail Magic had been following.

He could hardly believe that the man was in earnest.

But he hastened the justice of the peace forward and by prodding the sluggish feet of Sam Flack, soon had writing materials placed at the side of the cot.

Being a rapid writer, he seated himself to take the statement of the dying man.

Agate had been persuaded to leave the room.

"Proceed," Magic urged, fearful lest the spark of life might flicker out ere the remarkable confession that was promised could be made.

"My name is Rupert Armstrong," the man said,

while the detective wrote rapidly and the others drew close around to hear. "I was a half-brother to Silas Armstrong. When our father died, he left but a small amount of property to be divided between Silas and myself, who were then orphans grown. I took my share and started for the mines in the West with the idea of increasing my possessions; Silas remained at the old homestead, which came to him as his share. But I was not fitted for life at the mines. Either the work was too hard, or I dissipated too much—anyhow the Goddess of Luck was against me, and I found myself almost penniless, after years of living there. I had enough to come to the East with once more. I sought Silas. He had done well on the farm and in some little speculations. He assisted me. I then went to Texas. The same evil fortune followed all my endeavors there; again after some years of struggle, I found myself on the verge of starvation. It was gambling did it that time, I suppose. I obtained help out there and for a second time started to find my half-brother.

"By the time I reached Washington, I was no more than a tramp. I hadn't a penny in my pocket. I started to walk to my brother's farm beyond Bladensburg. Here I sought the hay-loft of the stable at the rear of the post-office and grocery store. It was late in the morning when I awoke. Fearing to be caught in there, I was crawling stealthily to the man-trap, when I heard voices talking in the vacant stall directly underneath. I listened. And I frequently heard the name of Silas Armstrong mentioned by two men who were there. One of the men was telling how he knew that Silas Armstrong wore a money-belt on his person; and if report was true in regard to recent success in speculation, he must have a sum of not less than ten thousand dollars in that belt, for the man said he had watched Silas ever since the transaction—even skulking about his farm by night and by day—and he could swear that the money had not yet been deposited in any bank. They were then forming a plot to get the money, at the cost of Silas' life if necessary. The intended victim was at that moment in town, with his daughter, making some purchases. He must, to reach his home, take a certain road. The road came together in a fork at some distance from Bladensburg either of which could be taken by the party leaving the town. When they had perfected their plot, I left the stable and plodded off on the road. A devil was coming into my heart. My brother was a successful and rich man. He carried all this wealth—ten thousand dollars, on his person. The devil grew stronger within me as I walked along. I found myself glancing backward at times, as if watching for him to come. Finally, before reaching the junction of the roads, I stopped and concealed myself in the bushes. I had resolved that if Silas came by that road, I would kill him and have the money.

"All the long day I lay in wait, nerving myself for the deed I had resolved upon. It was after night-fall when I heard the sound of wheels. Then his wagon came in sight, moving leisurely along. When the wagon was opposite my place of concealment, I leaped forth like some wild beast of prey and pounced upon him. I had prepared for my task a stout club, cut from a sapling that grew near my hiding-place. If you take the trouble to look, you can identify it. At the first moment of the assault, his daughter uttered a scream of affright and leaped out at the back of the wagon making off into the woods. But I cared not for her. She might flee as far as she chose; I knew that she did not know who it was that had attacked her father in that gloomy spot.

"I overpowered the old man—he was some years older than myself—and in a moment had torn the coveted treasure-belt from his body. Yes, I had it, this treasure, and I was to be no more a tramp. I was rich! Something caused me to hide again and wait in the bushes beside the road. I saw what I expected to see. One of the men who had plotted to obtain the belt shortly came to view from the trees on the other side of the road and knelt beside the body of Silas. Then he whistled a signal and the other man came up. There was a scene of wrath when they discovered that some one else had been before and stolen the money-belt. At that time I laughed to myself. The money-belt was in my hand.

"Then they separated, one going back into the woods and another along the road back toward Bladensburg. Presently there came another figure from the woods. It was the daughter. She stole forward and had almost reached the side of her dead father, when the man who had gone into the woods sprung out and upon her savagely. I heard him say: 'So I thought! I reckoned you might be near, and if you caught a sight of my face while I bent over your father, you might believe that I did it anyhow and eventually bring me to the gallows!' With that he carried her off—I don't know where to.

"Secretly the money-belt inside my ragged shirt, I started away. I began to think upon what I should do. I wanted to go right to town and buy clothes and fix myself comfortably. Then I thought that the murder would make a big fuss, and if I, a tramp, should be discovered to have so much money in my possession I would be arrested immediately. I fled on and on, my object being to get as far away from the spot as possible. The next day I examined the contents of the belt. The money was there, safe enough—too safe; for it was all in very large notes, and I knew not how I should possibly get one of the notes changed without the risk of exposure to myself. This thought, with so much wealth right within my grasp, worked upon me so that I began to wonder upon other things. Every sound that I heard, in the roads, in the timber, as I fled on, on for an aimless haven, seemed peopled with those who sought me for the murder or for the purpose of robbing me in turn of the precious belt.

"Day came and another night had fallen. I could find no rest; my eyes refused to yield to slumber. I was getting feverish. Many miles were now between me and the place where I had reddened my hands to obtain a wealth that was after all of no use to me in its present shape. At last I buried it. I would go on and by some means get together a decent suit of clothes so that I could enter a city and deposit one of the notes in a bank by a representation of some kind that would not excite suspicion. In this state of mind the fever grew worse, and at last I fell down by the roadside. When I recovered from what was to me a period of unconsciousness, I was a prisoner

here"—glancing around at the cell—"and I must have talked about the money in my delirium, for the man who was my jailer said I should never get out alive if I did not tell him where to look for the money I had unconsciously revealed in my talk was buried somewhere. I refused to do this, and for months I have suffered worse than any dog chained to his kennel. I have been in frenzy of madness perhaps worse than the madness of the poor things that I know are confined in this building. I have struggled and fought and have tried my utmost cunning to release myself. All to no purpose until this morning, when at last I succeeded in wrenching loose the gripping anklets and wristlets with which the fiend of a jailer had me fastened to the floor. There they are—look at them," pointing to the singular device riveted in the flooring, which had confined him like a mule in the stocks.

"I broke loose this morning, and it was an easy matter for me to batter through that door; besides, I was gifted with a very maniac's strength in my effort for liberty. I got out and found the man who had kept me confined. I made at him, and I would have torn his life out with my hands, my teeth and nails, if he had not shot me. That is all. I have no more to say."

Magic made a sign to the squire.

Rupert Armstrong was sworn.

His signature was attached to the paper which had been prepared and afterward read over by the deft fingers and quick tongue of the detective.

The names of the witnesses were added.

The paper was complete.

"One thing you have yet to tell us," remarked Magic.

"What is it?" came the faint rejoinder.

"Where is it that you buried the money? It should be returned to Agate Armstrong, the daughter of the man you robbed."

"I will tell you. Follow the river-bank, commencing at the rear of this building, and going in a north-westerly course as nearly as possible for about a hundred yards. You will there come to a clump of three isolated pines. Two of these pines at night will, if you step back, form a direct line with the morning-star. Keep on stepping back until you have counted thirty paces—then dig. The money is there in a wooden box which I obtained at a farm-house not far from here—"

He ceased with a great spasm of pain.

The confession had been made none too soon.

Another minute, and in the midst of the muscular convulsion, the true murderer of Silas Armstrong had gone before his Maker.

A search for the money resulted in its easy discovery.

Agate was astounded at what had been revealed, and which, under the circumstances, could hardly be discredited.

Ensor, then, had not killed her father!

Ensor was not to get off easily, however, after his crime of action toward the young girl at his house and again his murderous attempt at the den of Mother Rustle.

He was tried, and the fullest limit of the law applied to his case.

He went to the penitentiary in that same sullen manner which was characteristic of the man, and his saturn eyes, only glanced a baleful defiance upon every one when the great doors closed upon his wicked form for a long term.

A most astonished man was Terry Towser when he learned what had been revealed.

He had a short trial—in fact hardly a trial, for there was nothing actually to prove against him, except that he was caught in bad company.

He was dismissed, with the order to leave the city at once.

An order which that very accommodating tramp-burglar promised to obey without loss of time.

He was never heard of again, though it is probable that he and Rustle came together in another city, to resume their nefarious pursuits.

Rebecca Ensor disappeared as soon as she was apprised of her husband's conviction.

She utterly deserted him.

In an interview between Magic, Ellsworth and Agate, which took place in the prisoner's cell—whither they had gone to relieve his suspense by telling him of his possibly early freedom—it transpired that Ellsworth was thinking of his project to escape at the time he requested that anything which might be found in the cell be given to Erminie Armstrong, as she was then known. He had arranged the alphabet as a convenience to rapidly jot down the figures of a communication he meant her to receive, telling her of his escape and whither he should go.

For instantly upon beholding the figures in the hand of the detective on the day of the latter's visit, Ellsworth recognized the work of Agate.

It was a well-used cipher between the lovers, and for the exact purpose Magic had surmised.

Time passed rather pleasantly for the young man, until the September term of court.

Then, one of the first cases called was that of William Ellsworth; second trial for the murder of Silas Armstrong, etc.

The facts as shown forth in the ante-mortem statement of Rupert Armstrong, had been verified to an almost complete degree in the interim; the spot was discovered where the sapling had been cut off to serve as a club for the murderer.

On the money-belt found was the name of Silas Armstrong, which Agate said she had worked there with her own hands in silk.

The evidence seemed to be convincing.

The State's attorney moved a discharge of the prisoner, which was done promptly, and Ellsworth left the court room a free man, without the slightest stain upon his name, thanks to the parting words from the judge, made before a large assemblage in explanation of the remarkable intricacy of the evidence which had at first caused the conviction of Ellsworth.

Straightway the lovers were married by the mayor himself.

Magic gave away the bride.

The detective received a handsome reminder of thanks from the happy pair, who started at once for Washington, to see to the more fitting disposal of the remains of Agate's father.

In the detective's private office there is a small

frame with a glass front, behind which, on a plain piece of white card, is pasted a slip of paper.

The paper bears a succession of puzzling figures.

Underneath is written:

"The Web of a Cipher!"

THE END.

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